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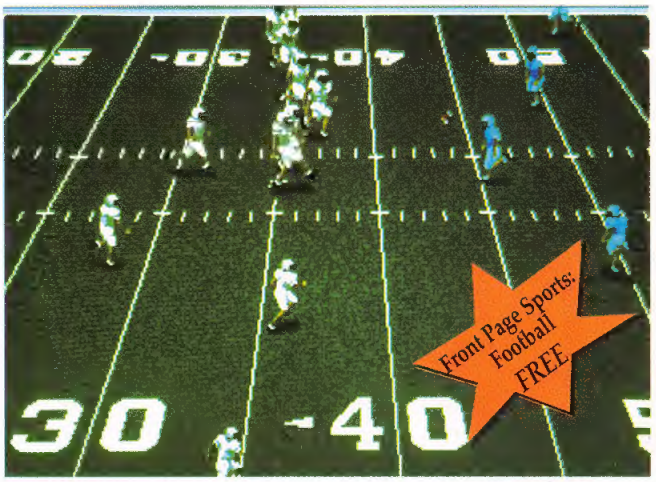
***Aces of the Pacific***
*"The benchmark of the 90s for flight simulators."*
**—Simulation Magazine**

## On the Gridiron

Get into the action with this amazingly realistic simulation. Its 3-D look puts you in the middle of the action in the most complete football gaming package ever. Play quarterback arcade-style or be the coach and play a strategy game against an opponent or against the computer. View instant replays from a floating camera you position. Front Page: Football is designed to appeal to players at any level. You get a full 47-man roster including injured reserve, up to 28 teams and 1,400 players per league, 200+ stock plays, 300+ stat categories and your choice of exhibition or a full season of play.

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*"... remains unchallenged as the most complete football game ever... for gridiron fans of all interest levels..."*
**—Electronic Games**

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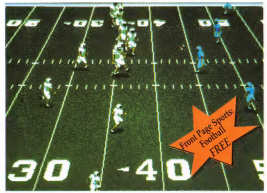


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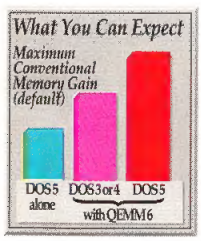


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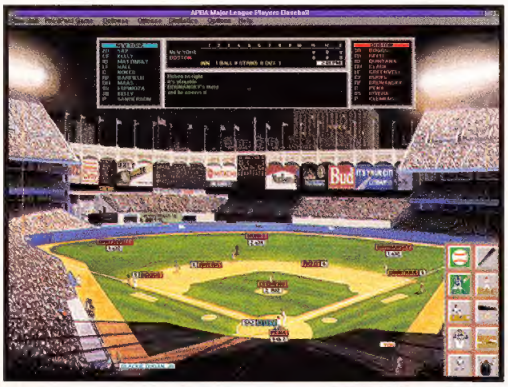

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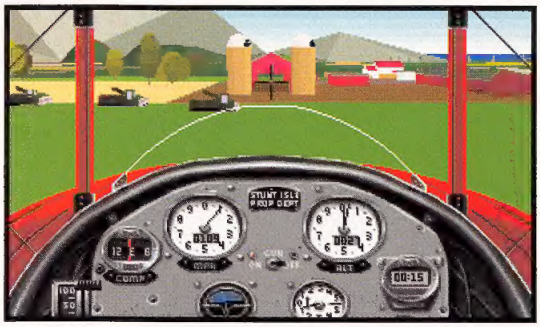

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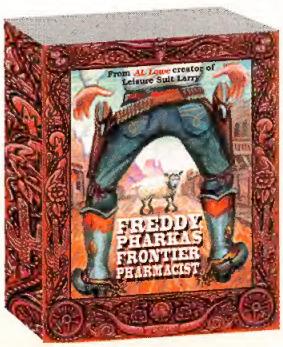
# The Good...

# The Bad...

# And The Butt-Ugly.

In the Old West, you couldn't tell the bad guys from the good guys by how ugly they were (you had to rely on the color of their hats). But in ***Freddy Pharkas, Frontier Pharmacist,*** even a scrawny, sissified, one-eared Pharmacist can be a good guy.

Al Lowe, creator of Leisure Suit Larry, spins a yarn of schoolmarms and chorus girls with hearts o'gold, cowboys and Indians, and varmints and heroes. It's the brand-new, age-old tale of Freddy Pharkas, a gunslinger who gave it all up for his love of pharmacology. Together with his faithful Indian companion, Srini Bagdnish, Freddy sets out to save




bucolic, boring Coarsegold from a fate worse than Hollywood adaptation.

So don't just groan at all those old horse-opera clichés. ***Be one.*** Strap on your spurs for a saga that skewers every Western under the sun. Mosey on down to your software store and ask for ***Freddy Pharkas, Frontier Pharmacist,***

And smile when you say that.

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**MAY/JUNE 1993**

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# EDITOR'S NOTES

We knew there would be a lot of titles coming into our offices after CES — but we didn't expect them to hit us so fast and furious! We've increased the size of this issue in order to keep you up to date on the latest titles, but you won't find that more reviews come at the cost of intelligent, in-depth coverage. Unlike some magazines for PC gaming enthusiasts, you won't find a one-paragraph "review" in *PC Entertainment* — even our GameBytes are chock-full of the info you need to make the right decision when purchasing a game. And if one of our writers doesn't like a certain type of game, he or she won't review a game in that category. If you're a war-game fan, it doesn't do you much good to read a review that begins, "I've never liked war games..."

Speaking of war games, one of the greatest of all time has just received a major overhaul. *Empire*, released back in the mid-eighties, won the hearts and souls of many a war-gamer, none more than our Desktop General columnist William R. Trotter. With its EGA graphics and sparse sound, however, this wonderfully conceived game of combat and conquest was beginning to show its age. But just as it was beginning to look as though *Empire* was fighting a rear-guard action against the sexy graphics and slick interfaces of the latest batch of strategic extravaganzas, New World Computing released *Empire Deluxe*. All you *Empire* fanatics will want to check out General Trotter's analysis of the changes that Mark Baldwin and Bob Rakosky have brought to the new, enhanced version — story on page 44.

We've got plenty of other great feature stories for you in this issue — an exclusive interview with *Prince of Persia I* and *II* designer Jordan Mechner, a roundup of the latest baseball simulations, and of course a detailed look at *Dark Sun: Shattered Lands*, the new release from SSI that debuts the company's new AD&D engine and game world. You'll also want to check out our expanded gaming news coverage, including the scoop on upgrades and bug fixes for your favorite titles.

Stephen Poole
Editor

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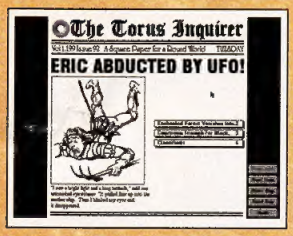
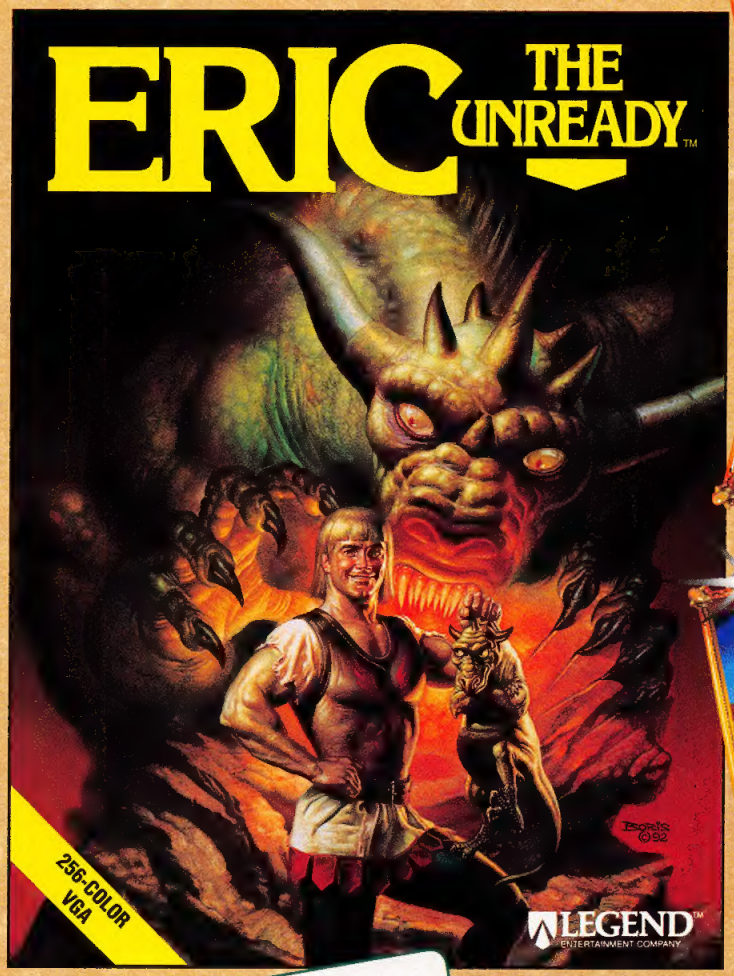


Here's what the experts are saying about *Eric the Unready.*

*"A comedy adventure full of whimsy and wonder"*
**—Computer Gaming World**

*"Eric is flat-out funny. There's comedy for everyone and a good quest to boot."*
**—Computer Game Review**

*"A wonderfully hilarious adventure"*
**—Game Bytes Magazine**

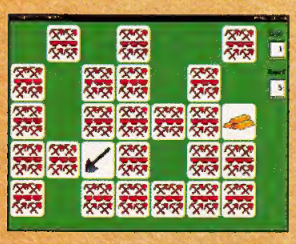
Eric the Unready established his reputation by impaling his instructor during jousting class. Then, when Princess Lorealle the Worthy is kidnapped, Eric begins a madcap quest through this hilarious fantasy world packed with dragons and dwarves, wizards, unicorns, and the most fearsome beasts of all, the dreaded Attack Turtles.

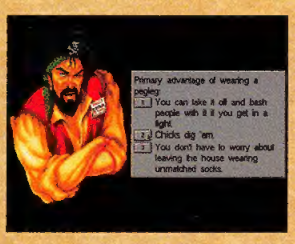
Every player will find at least one favorite movie, TV show or adventure game that has been struck by Bob Bates' pen! From the award-winning author of *TIMEQUEST.*

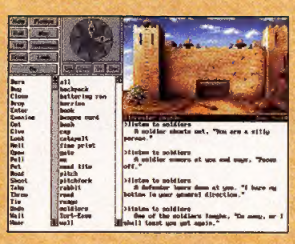
"I laughed till my pants fell down!"
Larry Laffner

"More fun than a barrel of monkeys!"
Guywood Threepbrush

- **Breathtaking fantasy art!**
- **256-color VGA**
- **Awesome sound track**
- **New menu-driven system for conversing with characters**
- **Intriguing mix of interfaces creates a constantly changing graphical scene**




Primary advantage of wearing a pegleg:
1. You can take it off and bash people with it if you get in a fight.
2. Chicks dig 'em.
3. You don't have to worry about leaving the house wearing unmatched socks.



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# THE VERY BEST IN STRATEGIC STARSHIP COMBAT

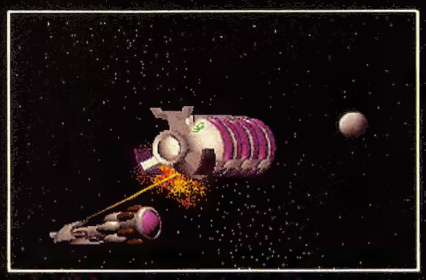
***Impressions are delighted to announce an Omnitrend production - Rules of Engagement 2!***

The original became an instant success -"one of the top 6 games of 1991" (Newsweek), "involving, well-planned, entertaining, highest levels of intelligence and excitement" (Computer Game Review).

Now, the sequel surpasses even the original's excellence!

Rules of Engagement 2 is a real-time, strategic space combat game. The player commands a fleet of starships engaging enemy ships in campaigns composed of multiple combat missions. The attention to realism and detail (Omnitrend's hallmark) and the sheer size of the game are phenomenal, and are made accessible by the unique easy to use control system.

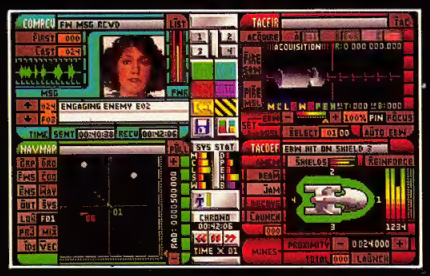
*Rules of Engagement 2* is the latest Interlocking Game System module - and can link with *Breach 2* or *Breach 3* (coming this fall).



a still from an animated squence

- Exciting animated sequences featuring 3D rendered spaceships relate the storyline at strategic points within campaigns. Players can create their own tree-structured campaigns with the world's first campaign-builder - and can even include their own PC Animate Plus animation files!

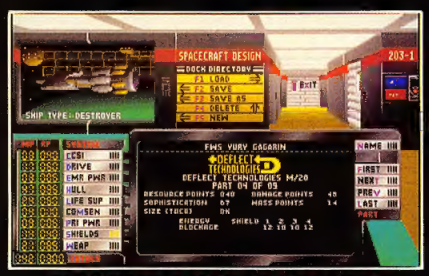
- *Rules of Engagement 2* features an outstanding interface. Game screens consist of four QuadPanels, color coded to distinguish different control systems. The central control bar coordinates all activity between panels. Users can select which of the 28 QuadPanels appear on the main screen - and can even save several configurations for use in different situations.



sample configuration of QuadPanels

- *Rules of Engagement 2* offers a significant advance in artificial intelligence within computer gaming. Each starship captain has a substantial dossier complete with many personality traits which affect how he, she or it reacts to orders and situations which arise.

a starship captain's dossier



outfitting a ship in dry dock

- *Rules of Engagement 2* offers immense replay value, allowing the player to design and construct both friendly and hostile spacecraft and their captains, specify the physical and mental capabilities of the enemy forces -- and design solar systems in which the battles will take place!

***Committed to Excellence in Strategy Entertainment***

Impressions Software, Inc. 7 Melrose Drive, Farmington, CT 06032

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The original became an instant success -"one of the top 6 games of 1991" (Newsweek), "involving, well-planned, entertaining, highest levels of intelligence and excitement" (Computer Game Review).

Now, the sequel surpasses even the original's excellence!

Rules of Engagement 2 is a real-time, strategic space combat game. The player commands a fleet of starships engaging enemy ships in campaigns composed of multiple combat missions. The attention to realism and detail (Omnitrend's hallmark) and the sheer size of the game are phenomenal, and are made accessible by the unique easy to use control system.

*Rules of Engagement 2* is the latest Interlocking Game System module - and can link with *Breach 2* or *Breach 3* (coming this fall).

a still from an animated squence

• Exciting animated sequences featuring 3D rendered spaceships relate the storyline at strategic points within campaigns. Players can create their own tree-structured campaigns with the world's first campaign-builder - and can even include their own PC Animate Plus animation files!

sample configuration of QuadPanels

• *Rules of Engagement 2* features an outstanding interface. Game screens consist of four QuadPanels, color-coded to distinguish different control systems. The offnital control bar coordinates all activity between panels. Users can select which of the 28 QuadPanels appear on the main screen - and can even save several configurations for use in different situations.

• *Rules of Engagement 2* offers a significant advance in artificial intelligence within computer gaming. Each starship captain has a substantial dossier complete with many personality traits which affect how he, she or it reacts to orders and situations which arise.

a starship captain's dossier

outfitting a ship in dry dock

• *Rules of Engagement 2* offers immense replay value, allowing the player to design and construct both friendly and hostile spacecraft and their captains, specify the physical and mental capabilities of the enemy forces -- and design solar systems in which the battles will take place!

*Committed to Excellence in Strategy Entertainment*

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# RULES OF ENGAGEMENT 2™

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# RULES OF ENGAGEMENT 2™

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## NEW MARKETING STRATEGIES

**eadySoft** is bundling three of its most popular titles in a "greatest hits" package. *The Animation Classics Pack* combines *Dragon's Lair II: Time Warp*, *Wrath of the Demon*, and *Space Ace* at a $69.95 list price.

ReadySoft also announced the upcoming release of **Empire**'s *War in the Gulf*, which projects U.S.-Iraqi tensions into the near future (1995 to be exact.) Players will command M1 tank units in efforts to skirt a second Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

*War in the Gulf*

To promote its *Expanded Memory Manager-386*, **Quarterdeck** is packaging it with three hit PC games. The *QEMM-386 GamePAQ* (priced at $99.99) will feature Sierra's *Aces of the Pacific* and *Front-Page Sports: Football*, as well as a mail-in coupon for Origin's *Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds*. For more information on the GamePAQ, call Quarterdeck at (800) 354-3222.

**R.A.W. Entertainment** is cutting out the middleman, and hopes to pass the savings on to you. The software publisher is bypassing retail distribution channels with direct marketing — customers will phone in their orders directly. R.A.W. also announced were significant price cuts as a result of this streamlined distribution — *Spoils of War* is being cut from $59.95 to $34.95, while all R.A.W. games priced at $49.95 will now be sold at $29.95. For information on how to order, contact R.A.W. at 1-800-323-7878.

## MOVING AND SHAKING

**ccolade** has received a substantial piece of the rock from one of the nation's largest insurance companies. Prudential Equity Investors (an offshoot of the insurance giant) has invested $11 million in Accolade's future growth. This is the first major venture-capital investment in Accolade's eight-year history. The company plans to use the added funding to market a string of celebrity-endorsed sports games, including *Jack Nicklaus Power Challenge Golf*, *Mike Ditka Football*, and *Bret Hull Hockey*.

In similar news, **Spectrum HoloByte** has secured $10.3 million in equity funding. The investment group, led by Vertex Management of Redwood City, California, has provided this second round of funding to assist Spectrum's expansion. The money has been earmarked for technology research into emerging platforms like CD-ROM and 3DO. Additionally, the investment will help Spectrum improve its flight-simulation technology and explore virtual reality applications.

## HEAR, HEAR!

f you've ever wished for a portable sound board that didn't require lengthy installment, **Digispeech** has developed a product especially for you. The *PORT-ABLE Sound Plus* plays back 16-bit digitized audio in stereo, supports 14-bit sound recording, and is compatible with both Sound Blaster and Ad Lib formats. The PORT-ABLE Sound Plus unit (also compatible with Windows 3.1) carries a suggested retail price of $198.95. Contact Digispeech at (916) 621-1787 for complete details.

## ON THE HORIZON

**d Software** is beckoning players to their *DOOM* ("where the sanest place is behind a trigger"). *DOOM* explores the nightmarish scenario that ensues when a research facility is suddenly overrun by multitudes of demonic creatures. Like Id's last effort, *Wolfenstein 3-D*, *DOOM* is arcade mayhem in a first-person, 3-D maze setting. With more weapons and better graphics, *Doom* looks to be a great follow-up to the award-winning *Wolfenstein 3-D*. The first installment of *Doom* will be available as shareware on most major online services; players can order the subsequent episodes directly from Id. Look for *Doom* in mid-summer.

Those seeking an educational graphics-adventure might find **MECC**'s *Amazon Trail* to their liking. The latest game from the renowned educational software publisher sends you on a time-travelling rescue mission on behalf of an ailing Inca king. *Amazon Trail* aims for realism by integrating photographs and audio recordings captured on location. *Amazon Trail* lists for $49.95 and is slated for a summer release.

*Doom*

*Lance Stone* certainly isn't the world's first superhero, but he may be the first comic-book character to *never* appear in an actual comic book. **PC Comix** is

# If you don't have F-15 Strike Eagle III, you're still playing games!

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"Versatile, violent, and victorious. Those are the kinds of adjectives that should accompany this cutting edge flight simulator."

*Computer Gaming World*

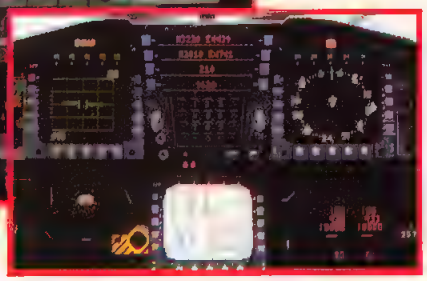
"I expected this game to knock me through the back wall. I wasn't disappointed."

*Computer Game Review*

"Being one of the highest time pilots in the Strike Eagle, with about 1200 F-15E hours and some 115 plus sorties in the Persian Gulf theater, I can honestly say that your Strike Eagle III simulator is the closest example of combat flying I've seen! Outstanding."

*A Letter from a Desert Storm F-15E Pilot*

**Actual cockpit shown.**



**Actual F-15 Strike Eagle III cockpit screen shot shown.**

F-15 Strike Eagle III is the most accurate and realistic combat flying simulator on the market today. And no wonder! Just look at all the startling features the third edition of MicroProse's landmark jet fighter has in store for you!

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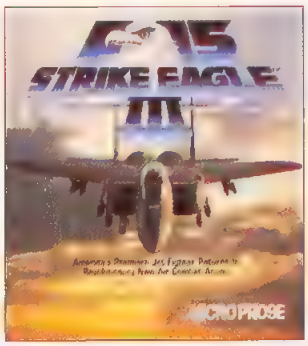


"Nuclear power facility destroyed! Iraqi Air Ministry next target!!"

"Scratch 3 more SAMs north of the 38th parallel!!"

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Product Information Number 221

*Lance Stone*

unveiling HyperComix, a series of electronic comic books for PCs. The first "issue" to reach store shelves, *Lance Stone: Trouble at the Woz*, introduces you to the futuristic detective-story plot and the quick-fisted title character. *Lance Stone* features multiple plot branches and high-res VGA graphics. *Trouble at the Woz* is retailing for $20, and the second and third issues will be available shortly.

Expect a slew of releases from **SSI** this summer. Military strategists interested in WWII can look forward to *Clash of Steel*, which spans six years of European conflict, including the fall of France and D-Day, while *Gary Grigsby's War in Russia* concentrates on the epic struggle on the eastern front. *Clash of Steel* ($69.95) is due out in June, and *War in Russia* ($79.95) should be available by August. SSI is also busy working on two D&D titles: *D&D Stronghold* and *D&D Gazeteer: Fantasy Empire*. Both games are slated to ship by summer's end, and carry a $59.95 suggested retail price. Another title coming from SSI is *Archon Ultra*, which updates the strategy game *Archon*. Look for it in July.

**Mindcraft** is following up the well-received *Siege* with *AMBUSH at Sorinor*. As a mercenary captain, you're in charge of a broad variety of troop types, and must take financial and political considerations into account as you accept contracts for various missions. *AMBUSH* features a scenario editor and map builder, and should be on shelves by the time you read this.

Hardcore *Harpoon* fans will soon have reason to rejoice — **Three-Sixty** is putting the finishing touches on *Harpoon Designer's Series II*. *HDS II* will enhance the four *Harpoon* BattleSets, offering 48 new action scenarios. Players will also receive the Harpoon Tactical Guide (a strategy overview) and the Harpoon Data Annex (which lists every notable spec in the entire series). *HDS II* will be available for both PC and Mac, with a suggested retail price of $39.95.

**MicroLeague** is adding a new entry to its lineup of sports games. *QuarterPole* ($49.95) brings horse-racing to the PC by allowing players to roam freely around the various centers of track activity (i.e., the stables, the jockey lounge, even the track commissioner's office), watch races, and place wagers. The VGA graphics are richly colored, and the first-person perspective gives the game the feel of a graphic adventure.

Part espionage mission and part presidential trivia quiz, **Tanager**'s *Operation U.S. Presidents* hopes to intrigue and educate. The ultimate goal is to break a set of codes eluding C.Y.P.H.E.R., a secret organization which the player works for. Success depends on the ability to recall historical facts and retrieve information from the game's storehouse of data on U.S. presidents. The game has a suggested retail price of $49.95.

**Dr. T's Music Software** is bringing Karaoke home for kids. *Dr. T's Sing-A-Long* serves up 25 popular children's songs in a Windows-based program mixing animation and music. Dr. T's plans to update the series with additional song discs. *Dr. T's Sing-A-Long* retails for $59.95.

*Quarterpole*

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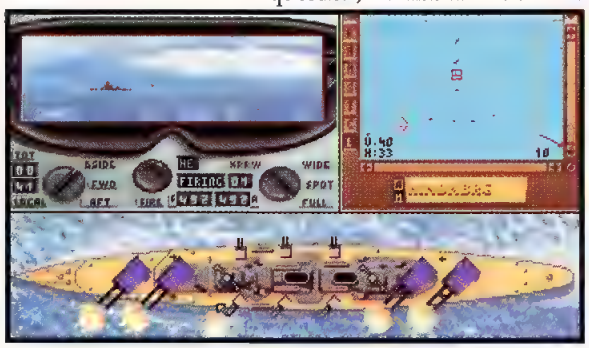
## UPDATE

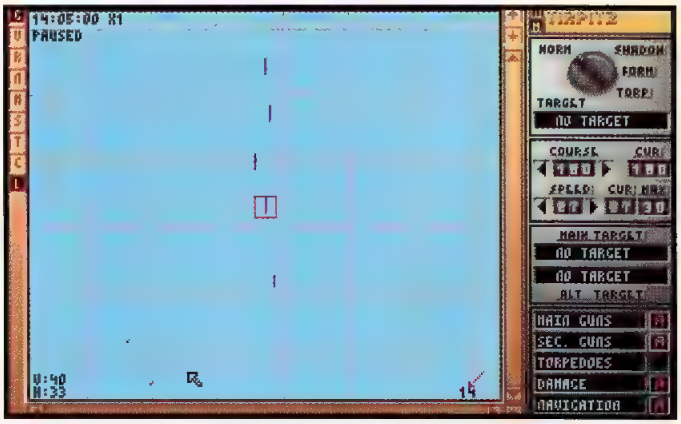
*Editor's note: With more PC gaming titles than ever before, there's a growing number of add-ons, expansion disks, upgrade versions, and bug patches. Beginning this issue, the* Update *section will feature Contributing Editor T. Liam McDonald's analysis of the latest releases designed for use with existing programs.*

SSI leads the way this time around with three expansion disks for *Great Naval Battles of the North Atlantic*, featuring new ships and new campaigns based on hypothetical scenarios. *Superships of the Atlantic* and *America in the Atlantic* are already out, and a Scenario Editor is on the way. *Superships of the Atlantic* asks the question, "What if Hitler had waited three more years before waging his war against British shipping?" By 1942, at least nine new ship classes on the drawing boards would have been ready, including the "H" class battleship: bigger, faster, and more powerful than the *Bismarck*. Though the H class was based on existing designs, that extra speed or those few crucial yards of weaponry range could have decided several battles.



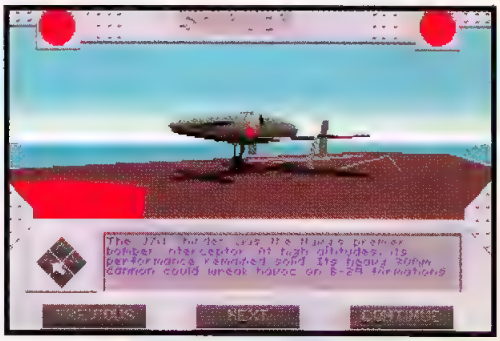
*Superships of the Atlantic*

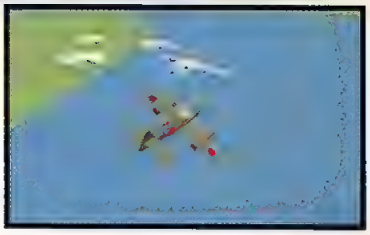
Of course, in those three extra years the Brits also designed ships, and these come into play as well. Ten scenarios pit these ships against each other as well as against the older designs, while three campaigns over four years show the effects of different ships at different times. *Superships* includes version 1.1 of *GNBNA*, which fixes some historical errors and sound problems in the original game, adds hot-key commands, tightens up the AI, and tweaks many other elements too numerous to mention, many of them bugs.




*America in the Atlantic*

*America in the Atlantic* supposes that the American fleet in the Pacific was forced into a confrontation with the Nazis in the Atlantic. A total of 13 American ship designs are added to the ever-increasing forces in the Atlantic, forcing the Nazis into some interesting confrontations: The *Bismarck* versus the *Iowa*?. This is just one of ten scenarios, along with three limited campaigns offering elaborate configurations of opposition, such as a conquered Britain allied with Germany against the United States. *America* includes version 1.2 of *GNBNA*, incorporating the enhancements of version 1.1. Though a smaller patch than 1.1, 1.2 fixes gunnery, torpedo, damage control, air operations, and fiddles with the AI even more. (SSI apparently hasn't worked out all those sound bugs yet — I still have problems on my computer.)





*WWII: 1946*

**QQP**'s *Great Battles of the 20th Century* expansion disk for *The Perfect General* adds contests from World War II, Vietnam, the Middle East, the Falklands, and Korea, along with speculative battles such as the Warsaw Pact versus China, a German landing in Britain during WWII, an unlikely American ground-based strike against Libya, and an evenless likely Japanese landing in California. There's a fine variety of combatants and maps here, and while *The Perfect General* lacks the finesse and detail of *V for Victory*, it's still an enjoyable, simple war game that doesn't take hours of planning to play. The maps in *Great Battles* are a vast improvement over the original *Perfect General* maps, offering a variety of different terrains and making the game simply look better. Some WWI scenarios might have been nice, but the speculative scenarios are so tongue-in-cheek (President Perot?) and far-out that it's hard to complain.

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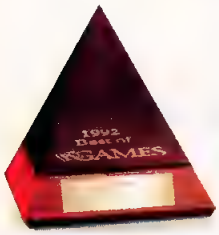


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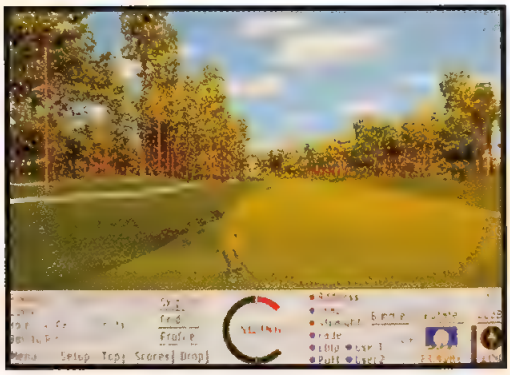

*Pinehurst #2 Course Disk for 386 Pro*

Military confrontations aren't the only battles simulated on the PC. There are thousands and thousands of PC duffers who square off with *Links 386 Pro*, and they'll be happy to know that the first two course disks made especially for the game are beginning to trickle in, and they are, in a word, stunning. **Access** supported the original *Links* with a great series of course disks, and its commitment to bringing quirky and classic courses to your desktop remains unchanged. First off the tee is *Mauna Kea*. This Hawaiian island course is not only a visually dramatic combination of pounding surf, sharp angles, tropical scenery, and lava rock, but it's also *extremely* challenging. That third hole over the breakers is a killer!

While *Course Number Two* at *Pinehurst Resort and Country Club* in North Carolina is less visually dramatic and somewhat easier than Mauna Kea, it's still an attractive, moderately challenging course. Stretching over 7000 yards, this world-class course is home to several Amateur and Pro competitions. The tree-lined fairways are rendered in outstanding detail, making for a relaxing round of golf.

The most entertaining flight sim of last year was undoubtedly **Dynamix**'s *Aces of the Pacific*. A mixture of accurate flight models and playability, a lively career option, historical depth, and a great variety of missions, it has retained an honored spot on many a flight junkie's hard drive. *WWII: 1946* is the first (and possibly only) expansion disk for this terrific game, and it adds a great deal to the original. Planes that never made it into real-life combat have been added, along with a series of deep, involved "what if?" scenarios dealing with the continuation of the war beyond Hiroshima and Nagasaki. You can fly the American P-80 or Japanese Kikka (two of the earliest jets), the crazy Shinden (with a rear-mounted propeller), or the incomparable Bearcat. The campaigns revolve around the plans for Operations Olympic and Cornet, including some hairy beach fighting and kamikaze escort missions. (Dynamix did not include an option to be a kamikaze, but you can fly a de facto kamikaze mission by simply crashing into an American ship. Of course, your plane won't be loaded with the explosives, the reason for the effectiveness of this tactic.)

---

Because of the complexity of today's PC entertainment releases, there's a real need for patch disks, or bug patches, to correct the inevitable glitches that inevitably make their way into the final version of a game. Patches are available from the game publisher, or can be downloaded from any number of bulletin-board systems. Most publishers issue bug patches gratis; if they don't, complain. After all, it may be your problem, but it's *their* bug.

Not included with the aforementioned *WWII: 1946* is Patch A, which allows tapes to be saved correctly in training missions, prevents pilots stationed on Kokubu airbase from starting missions from the middle of the ocean, no longer assigns USAAF to attack American warships, corrects the flaw of dropping out of autopilot when friendlies are encountered, and fixes the Shell System Error.

Version 2.0 of *B-17 Flying Fortress* from **MicroProse** allows for computerized bombing and landing (sorely missed in the original release), as well as options to silence that annoying music and change crew names.

Dynamix's *Front Page Sports: Football* is now more realistic than ever — version 1.02 features improvements in animation, AI, statistics, and play balance. Additions include weather reports, more flexibility when changing names or transferring abilities, and better sound support.

**Norsehelm Productions** has issued two patch disks for *Ragnarok*; the patch before version 2.0 of the game fixes soundboard incompatibility problems and all known errors (equipping, lycanthropy, etc.), while the patch after 2.0 fixes only the known errors (sound board problems are not corrected).

Version 1.16 of **Mindcraft's** *Magic Candle III* fixes Charter/Scepter exchange, which was damaged in version 1.15, Mirror of Honesty/candlewick problem, and the problem of characters transferred from *Magic Candle II* not getting god's boons.

Here's a quick rundown on some other bug patches and new versions of games:

- **Impressions** has releaseda patch for *Caesar* that fixes problems the game had with Stacker.
- Soundboard compatibility problems in *Rex Nebular*, *Mickey's Jigsaw Puzzle* and *Hare Raising Havoc* have been corrected with patches.
- Version 1.0B of **D.C. True**'s *Shadow President* runs with about 30,000 bytes less memory than previous versions, and includes a batch file for creating a boot disk.
- Version 1.03 of *Solitaire's Journey* eliminates Tournament glitches and mouse-control problems.
- A *Space Quest V* patch corrects the inability to restore or quit after running out of time on W-D40's ship, fixes the inability to skip polishing the Star Con crest in EGA mode, and prevents the loss of the cursor when Roger steps off the log which spans the river on Kiz Urazgubi.
- *Spelljammer* version 1.1 has corrected the problem of system crashes during boarding sequences.

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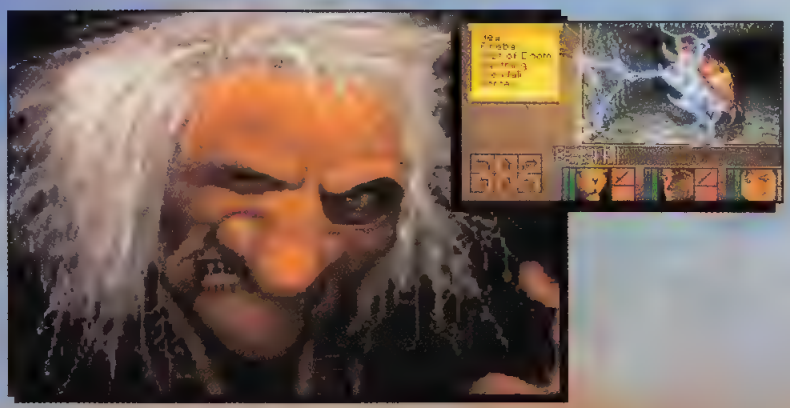

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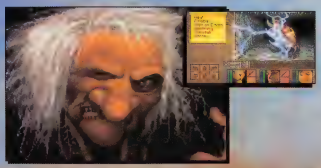
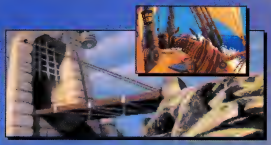
The Dark Army encroaches. King Richard falls. And Scotia beckons you, laughing...

In her mad quest for power, Scotia has ravaged the kingdom. She seeks the throne, yet it eludes her. She's getting desperate. She's getting mean.

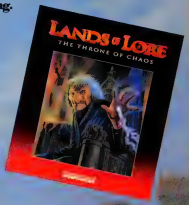


CAN YOU STOP HER? DO YOU DARE?



## FEATURING

- **Compass and Automapper Included -** Adventure through ancient keeps and living forests. Unearth hidden ruins and haunted caves.
- **Make Friends and Influence People -** Cooperate with the helpful, sidestep the treacherous and destroy the dangerous.
- **Indulge in a Land of Sensory Delights -** Over 20 megabytes of compressed art and special effects. Actually hear the clash of steel! Feel the blows of terrors who slip beneath your guard!
- **Quick and Easy Combat and Spell Casting.**

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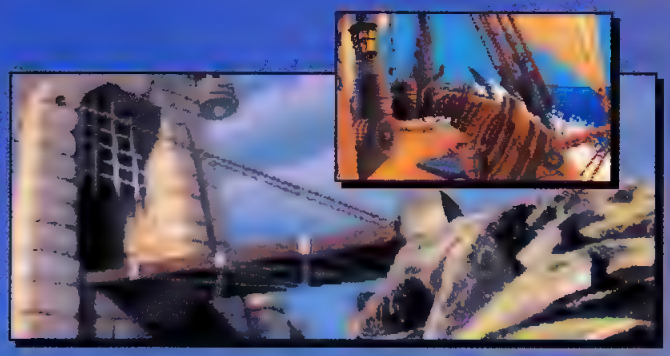

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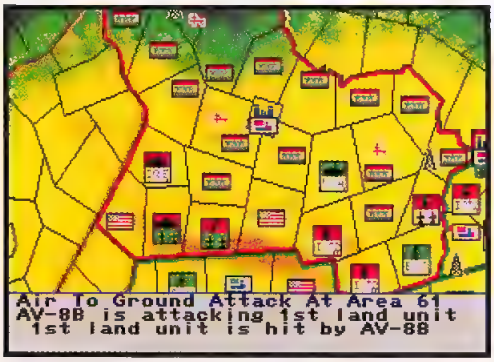
## A LINE IN THE SAND

This is **SSI**'s entry into the Gulf War gaming sweepstakes, a genre that pretty much pooped out before the first simulations came to the market: It was a "splendid little war" (as Horace Greeley once said about the Spanish-American conflict), but it makes for a lousy simulation.

At first glance, it seems a homely little offering: abstracted terrain maps and no battle graphics except for a generic dogfight animation sequence that's almost insultingly crude (about on par with the sort of thing found in the first-generation of 8-bit Nintendo games). But once you realize that this is not a game intended to compete with SSI's own sophisticated *Conflict: Middle East*, and certainly not with Three-Sixty's *Patriot* (reviewed in "The Desktop General" elsewhere in the issue) — that it is, in fact, aimed at the beginner or intermediate level war-gamer — its virtues become more apparent.




For one thing, the game's spartan appearance belies the sophistication of its data base; *A Line in The Sand* doesn't *look* realistic, but it does tend to play with considerable plausibility. It's easy to learn, plays a good, clean game in a single evening's free time, and the variety of scenarios gives it respectable replay value. In sum, a good beer-and-pretzels game for anyone who has a couple of hours to spend and just wants to have a good time.

Especially interesting are the Diplomatic games, which match Middle Eastern volatility (the "jihad factor") against the relatively saner requirements of Western and Israeli *realpolitik*. These exercises give resonance and depth to the battle scenarios and actually convey some sense of the real-life snakepit conditions of Middle Eastern diplomacy.

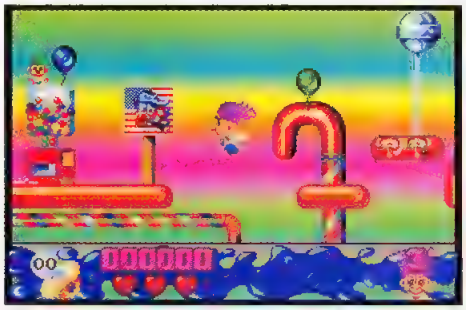
Gamers who insist on order-of-battle realism and fine-grained detail will probably not be attracted to *A Line in the Sand*, but novice war-gamers and players looking for a quick, easy, and satisfying fix of military strategy will get their money's worth.

— *William R. Trotter*

## TROLLS

Last year's troll-doll revival was probably inevitable. After all, there's not much about troll dolls that can go out of style. Like their spinning counterpart the yo-yo, these little dolls provide simple diversion without breakable parts or batteries to purchase. Trolls amuse us solely by being charming.

And that's exactly what *Trolls* does — amuse. Granted, I was skeptical of a game infused with so much cuteness, but it turns out that **Capstone** built an engaging and friendly game world for these wild-haired good-luck charms.



*Trolls* is easy to get into and can be addictively hard to put down. You con-troll a troll as it runs and jumps, searching for baby trolls and power-ups while either avoiding or bouncing on (and destroying) the various creatures and animated objects standing between you and success.

There's no plot to this arcadish romp, but it hardly seems to matter. Your only goal is to find the specified number of baby trolls in each of the seven levels. Each level contains at least three areas, so you're looking at well over 20 missions that must be completed before you achieve Ultimate Trolldom.

The backdrop for each level (Toyland, Sodaland, Fairground Land, etc.) is crammed with all sorts of suitable props: in Media-land, for instance, you'll dash past audio cassettes and scoot across videotapes. The screens are packed with rich pastels and colors from all around the rainbow, making *Trolls* a real treat for the eye.

It's simple and a little juvenile, but *Trolls* is great to look at and fun to play. It's also pleasant medicine for anyone bored with the hyperactive violence of many arcade games. Trolls are once and forever a classic American toy, and it seems fitting that the only weapon Capstone's trolls use is...you guessed it...a yo-yo.

— *Phill Powell*

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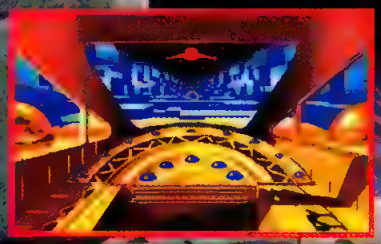

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Product Information Number 109

# After One of the Most Tony La Russa Decided

## Announcing

# Tony La Russa BASEBALL II

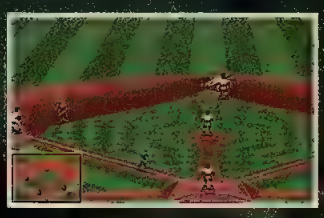
## It's a whole new ballgame!

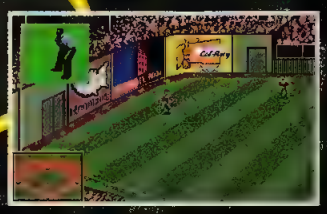
How do you improve on the *"1992 Sports Game of the Year"*? The same way that Tony La Russa improves on a pennant-winning team. You study your players, from their clutch hitting to their personalities in the clubhouse. And you check out the competition, up and down the league.

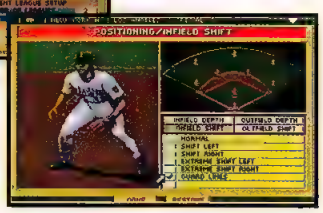
We did all that. And discovered since La Russa I, a lot has happened in the world of baseball. We've used that knowledge to create a game that will continue to master the category. Because we don't know how to do it any other way.

We called upon the same team to create La Russa II. Three-time American League Manager of the Year, Tony La Russa and a game designer with over 20 years of baseball experience. Together they redesigned this game from the ground up. The result is the most complete baseball experience ever, with the best action, the best graphics and the best stats.

If you choose to enter the dugout and be the manager, you're totally responsible for your actions. Which roster is going to work? Is that rotation due for an overhaul? Is it time to bring your secret weapon out of the dugout yet?

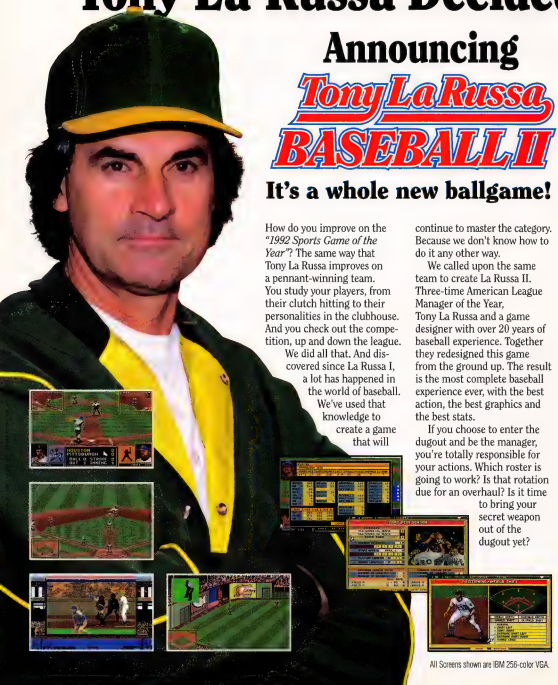







All Screens shown are IBM 256-color VGA.

# After One of the Most Successful Seasons Ever, Tony La Russa Decided to Start All Over Again.



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We're talking the largest action playing field visualized with 256-color VGA graphics. You'll have no excuse for not crushing a homer every time since your batting perspective is straight from the catcher's eye. You'll play on the most detailed field of its kind, from the dirt in the base path to the mow lines on the grass. And you'll see instant replays on the largest, most detailed replay screen ever.

**MAKE YOUR BEST PLAYS EVER.**

In La Russa II, players pivot at second while turning a double play, slide head and feet first, jump, dive, even toss underhand to the first baseman — all with one-touch button action. Each play is covered by Emmy award-winning, nationally-syndicated announcer, Ron Barr. True-to-life digitized sound effects include everything from the calls of umpires to the crack of the bat.

**134 CATEGORIES TO MAKE YOU A BETTER PLAYER.**

Only La Russa II gives you the most accurate baseball statistics in every one of them. You'll man your team, with or without Tony's advice, from over 2,000 legendary players and 54 classic teams – or anyone on the current roster. To help in your draft, you can display and print out leaders in 134 stat categories. And stats are tracked throughout the season for every player in every game.

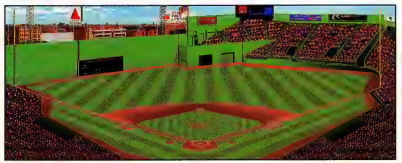
Each and every pitcher is rated for four pitches including fastballs, curves, change-ups and more.

*Emmy Award-winning announcer Ron Barr calls the action!*

**LA RUSSA II EXPANSION DISKS: THINK OF THEM AS THE WORLD SERIES THAT NEVER ENDS.**

■ **MLBPA PLAYERS** puts the 1992 season in your hands. Over 950 superstars including Barry Bonds, Dennis Eckersley, Nolan Ryan, Rickey Henderson, Tom Glavine, Cal Ripken, Jr., – they're all here – with big, full color portraits.

■ **AL/NL STADIUMS** gives you all current 28 major league stadiums, from the winds of San Francisco to the ivy of Chicago – even the new parks open for the '93 season – Colorado and Florida. The detail is incredible, right down to the Green Monster at Fenway. But these aren't just pretty pictures: prevailing winds, altitude, temperature and humidity all affect the flight of the ball – see how Babe Ruth hits the ball at mile-high Denver!

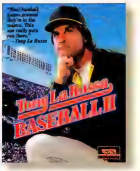


*Take yourself out to the real thing – from flagpole to flagpole, foul line to foul line.*

■ **FANTASY DRAFT** is the most powerful, full-featured fantasy draft league disk ever. Now you can pool all available players and conduct a real-life draft session – with 2-32 teams, and any combination of divisions and leagues.

**THE SEASON BEGINS NOW.**

Fact is, Tony La Russa won't put his name on anything less than the best. If you're looking for true baseball action, the name of the game is Tony La Russa Baseball II.

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# Successful Seasons Ever, to Start All Over Again.

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We're talking the largest action playing field visualized with 256-color VGA graphics. You'll have no excuse for not crushing a homer every time since your batting perspective is straight from the catcher's eye. You'll play on the most detailed field of its kind, from the dirt in the base path to the mow lines on the grass. And you'll see instant replays on the largest, most detailed replay screen ever.

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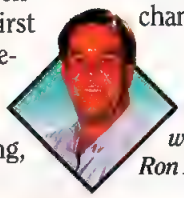

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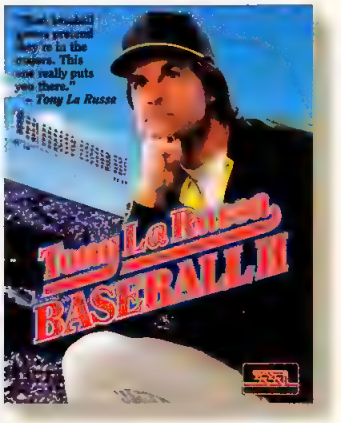


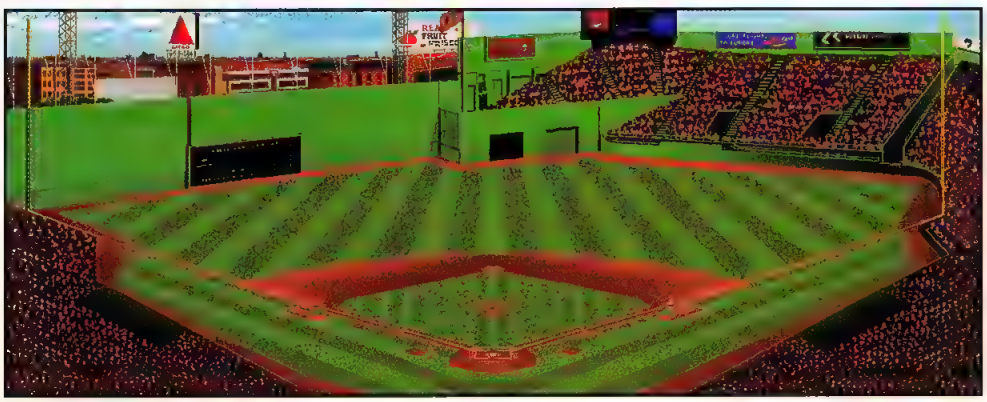

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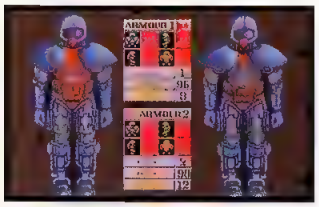
Product Information Number 113

## LASER SQUAD

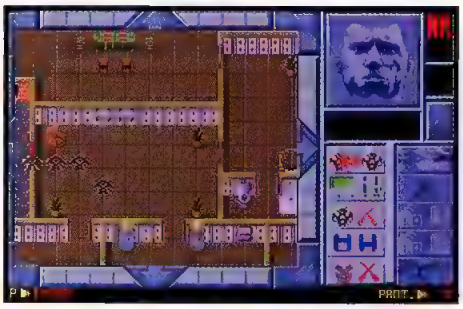
The first thing that will strike you about *Laser Squad* is the name of the company publishing it; until recently **Microleague Interactive Software** was **MicroLeague Sports**, known exclusively for its various sport simulations.

The second thing you'll notice is how closely *Laser Squad*, designed by U.K.-based **Krisalis Software**, resembles *Breach 2*. Like that venerable program, *Laser Squad* is a simulation of squad-level combat embedded in a science fiction environment. Movement and combat are governed by a system of Action Points — everything the characters do requires an expenditure of those, from priming a grenade to charging across a corridor. Consequently, tactics are governed as much by action-point allotments as by terrain and weaponry. Any character who has at least half of his or her action points at the end of a turn may deliver "opportunity fire" if a target presents itself during the opponent's turn. That means you'll need to carefully coordinate your team's movement, so that any squad member who's advancing is also covered by someone who can shoot.



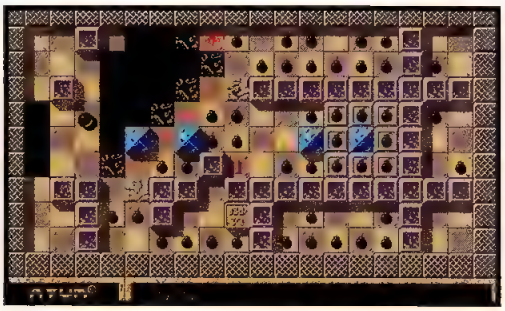

The interface is handsome and efficient, and the graphics are first-rate for this sort of game. My only real gripe is the limited number of missions — five — and the lack of a scenario editor to customize them. (Perhaps Krisalis could have included a few extra missions by cutting down on the extravagant narrative screens introducing each mission.) But those five skirmishes have seven levels of difficulty, and the computerized enemy is deadly even at the easier settings (you can also play against a human opponent). There's a lot of challenge in each set-up, and room to experiment with tactics, weapon mixes, and different categories of armor. If you like the idea of a combat with a sci-fi flair, you'll get your money's worth with *Laser Squad*.

— *William R. Trotter*



## OXYD

This puzzle game from **Dongleware** takes place in the world of Oxyd, a strange landscape within your computer. The object of the game is to release all the oxygen-emitting Oxyds by maneuvering a small steel ball through the game's territories in order to open up boxes; when two boxes containing same-colored Oxyds are opened, the Oxyds inside are freed.



Though that description might lead you to believe that *Oxyd* is just a glorified adaptaion of *Concentration*, the arcade element gives the game another dimension. The real trick isn't opening the boxes — it's getting your little ball past the laser beams, exploding bricks, bottomless pits, and crumbling floors that make up the territories.

It's a combination of strategy and action that turns out to be highly addictive. Each of the game's 100 territories requires a different, increasingly complicated solution. Your only tool may be a steel ball, but it can pick up other objects and use them in a surprising number of ways, and a territory will often have mini-puzzles that have to be solved before a single Oxyd can be released.

This isn't a game for the easily frustrated — some territories make the "taxing" levels of *Lemmings* look like a walk in the park. Finding a solution may take a few minutes, but *carrying out* that solution sometimes takes an eternity of rolling that accursed little marble around.

But *Oxyd*'s only real flaw isn't that it's excessively difficult; rather, the game is just too sparse and focused. The graphics and challenge are excellent, but the game has a steel-and-chrome edge that lacks personality. Still, puzzle lovers will get a kick out of *Oxyd*.

Like Apogee Software's *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Oxyd* is being published as shareware: the program is available on CompuServe, Internet, GEnie, and other boards, and the first ten levels are free. Further levels, however, are blocked by indestructible barriers which can only be removed by entering the proper code. The huge tome of codes, which also includes a number of playing tips, can be ordered through your local bookstore, or directly from Dongleware.

— *Jeff Lundrigan*

GAME PLAYERS PC Entertainment

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PC05

## PUTT PUTT JOINS THE PARADE

It's not often that a software company's debut title hits on all cylinders. But *Putt Putt Joins the Parade* from **Humongous Entertainment** clearly does. From the start, it charms the socks off of kids — adults, too — with outstanding graphics, animation, and sound. In addition to the first-rate cosmetics, *Putt Putt* is an excellent children's adventure, with lots to do and see. There's plenty of game here for the three-to-seven-year-old crowd.

The lead character, Putt Putt, is an animated talking car, who wants to join in the upcoming Cartown parade. In order to qualify, he must find a pet, get a balloon, clean up by going through the car wash, and so on. This means the child needs to explore some less-traveled roads to find a lost puppy, earn coins for the car wash by mowing lawns and delivering groceries, and perform a variety of other tasks. The game has a nice variety of locations, and since there's no time limit, the child can wander and enjoy many dozens of cleverly engaging diversions.

*Putt Putt* is packed with speech (all digitized human voices, many of them from young children), cute sounds, and comical musical effects. The smoothly animated cartoonlike graphics are so appealing, you'll think you're interacting with a quality Saturday morning kids' show.

I've observed half a dozen kids in the five-to-seven-year age range playing this game, and each one wanted to return to Cartown, even after the grand finale.

Putt Putt and friends are the creations of writer, mother, veteran software producer, and Humongous president, Shelley Day, along with Humongous co-founder Ron Gilbert, who designed the award-winning SCUMM interface used in *Monkey Island* and other LucasArts titles. A CD-ROM version of *Putt Putt* is also available.

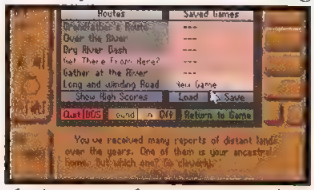
The game wants ten meg of hard-drive space, but every byte is worth it — if *Putt Putt* doesn't grab your child, nothing will.

*— Lance Elko*

## THE LOST TRIBE

Living near a volcano can be very comfortable — until it blows its top. With the leader of your prehistoric tribe and the best hunters buried in the subsequent lava flow, everyone turns to you to lead them away from Belchfire Mountain. But merely getting your tribe away from the volcano isn't enough. You've got to lead them to a new homeland, and the only one that will do is the one your ancient ancestors left many moons ago.

That's the premise of *The Lost Tribe* from **Lawrence Productions**, a game which focuses on leadership skills and resource management. The player begins each game by choosing one of several maps, each one representing a unique voyage with different problems and destinations. Start your journey by picking a scenario (they range in difficulty from "tough" to "Herculean"). The rest of your task is a piece of cake — a very hard-to-chew piece of cake, that is.




Each game turn signifies a day in the life of the tribe. You must decide where they will go, what they will hunt, what they will do, and how much they will eat each day. Of course, the terrain — forest, mountain, hills, wooded hills, plains, rivers, lakes, and volcanoes — affects what types of game will be most prevalent, and you'll need to take that into account when telling your hunters the prey they should look for. If you make the wrong choices too often, you may find yourself alone with no tribe following behind. Sure, it's mutiny, but can you blame them? Nobody trusts a bad leader.

23
34
22
40
Someday, Bloog predicts, the beautiful trees on these hills will be cut down and made into billions of pointy objects used to clean teeth.

Being successful is tough, and there are plenty of opportunities to make mistakes. Some members of the tribe think they would make better leaders, and will provide plenty of challenge. How you handle your problems, the decisions you make, and how much you learn from your errors are the indirect educational content of this look at prehistoric life. And just as in life, it's how you do on the trip that counts, not your score at the end of the game.

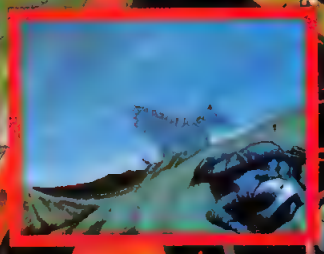
*— Leslie Eiser*

# EPIC

FOR THE AMIGA AND IBM PC

Billions of people are counting on you to destroy enemy warships and minefields, and to clear the way through evil enemy territory to a safe solar system.

But beware! Fuel and ammunition are limited. Your reactions, opponent's outgunning you and [illegible] running out.

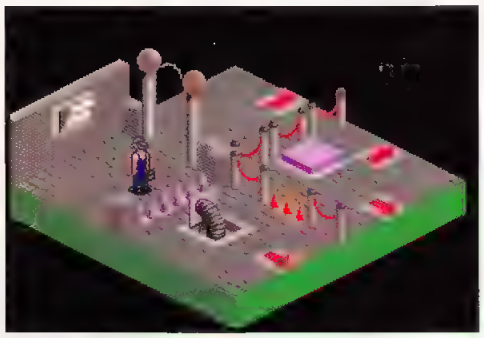


The name of the game

ocean

Ocean of America Inc.
Suite D-102
San Jose, CA 95131
[illegible]

## CONTRAPTION ZACK



This puzzler from **The Software Toolworks** tosses you into the massive Gadgetco manufacturing plant as an Electro Mechanical Technician on his first day at work. Your job is to get the plant's six Primary Machines operating, but your fellow millwrights have scattered your tools everywhere (the "Let's razz the new guy" syndrome), and the plant itself is a huge place full of gates, barriers, and buttons. Getting to know your way around won't be easy.

The main problem presented in each stage — that of getting the Primary Machine up and running — involves several smaller puzzles. A typical example might find you in a room with two wall switches, three closed doors, and a large screw. You can see the screwdriver you'll need to turn the screw, but it's locked behind a wire mesh gate. Flipping one of the wall switches might open one of the doors, which reveals a path to another screen. There, you might find a floor switch. Step on it, and something whirs offscreen. When you return to your starting point, the second door has opened. You'll run a maze of interconnected doors and switches before finally discovering the lever that opens the gate and lets you at the screwdriver. And when you turn that big screw, the third door opens and you step into a new series of doors and puzzles.

You view all this action from an oblique perspective, and the big, colorful graphics are a nice complement to the game's playful premise. The sound effects are appropriately mechanical, and can be a big help in determining whether or not your action has produced a reaction somewhere offscreen. You'll probably want to turn off the game's music, though. It's a bit too enthusiastic, and can get on your nerves pretty quickly.

To the designers' credit, *Zack* never becomes overly frustrating — even when you begin to tackle puzzles that stretch up, down, and all around for tens of screens. The smaller problems, like getting your hands on that screwdriver, are spaced nicely throughout each level, and solving them is enough intermittent reward to keep you going.

One word of warning: the requirements on the box specify you'll need a 286 or better. But when we ran the game on a 386SX/16, it was so slow as to be nearly unplayable. Even on a 386DX/25, it seemed as if Zack has lead in his boots. If you really want to get the most out of this highly enjoyable brain-teaser, we recommend at *least* a full-bore 386.

— *Matthew A. Firme*

## MARIO IS MISSING

In yet another attempt to save the world, Mario has blundered into trouble — and only Luigi can save him from the clutches of Bowser and his team of twisted turtles. In a castle filled with fire-flowers, Koopas, and Pokeys, there's little room for making mistakes, and no time to spare.

It may sound like pretty standard Nintendo fare, but *Mario is Missing* from **The Software Toolworks** is no dexterity workout — it's educational software, and surprisingly good education at that. Using his 25-node Passcode Operated Remote Transport and Larceny System (Portal for short), Bowser has stolen famous artifacts from cities around the globe. To make matters worse, Mario has been captured while attempting to stop the crime spree. To rescue Mario, Luigi must visit each city, restore all the landmarks or artifacts to their proper locations, and then lock the Portal by destroying the Pokey that guards the gate. Each locked Portal gets Luigi one step closer to the top of Bowser's burrow — and the imprisoned Mario.

Luigi uses a distinctive street map to travel throughout each city. The maps show the location of each landmark that must be visited, as well as rivers, islands, and bridges. The graphic representation of each town is excellent: Distinctive buildings line the sidewalks, from the townhouses of San Francisco to the glorious mosques and temples of Jerusalem — even the skyline of each city has been accurately reproduced.

Pamphlets which can be picked up at information booths describe the missing objects that are being carried around the cities by roaming Koopas. Youngsters explore the cities, looking for Koopas, information booths, passersby, and bonus tokens. At the easiest game levels, passing citizens provide specific information; at higher levels citizens respond with hints and riddles, making it much tougher to locate the city on the interactive map of the world.

To ensure that youngsters read the pamphlets, the curator

of each museum where the items are returned asks questions about the object being returned. And to actually lock the Portal, the player must name the city, as well as the country and continent where it's located.

Users expecting arcade action and magic mushrooms may be disappointed with the game, while education buffs may be surprised to find such solidly developed content inside. If your kids are interested in learning about major cities, reading about famous landmarks, accumulating pictures of famous locations, practicing some very practical map skills, and studying a bit of geography, they'll love *Mario is Missing*.

— *Leslie Eiser*

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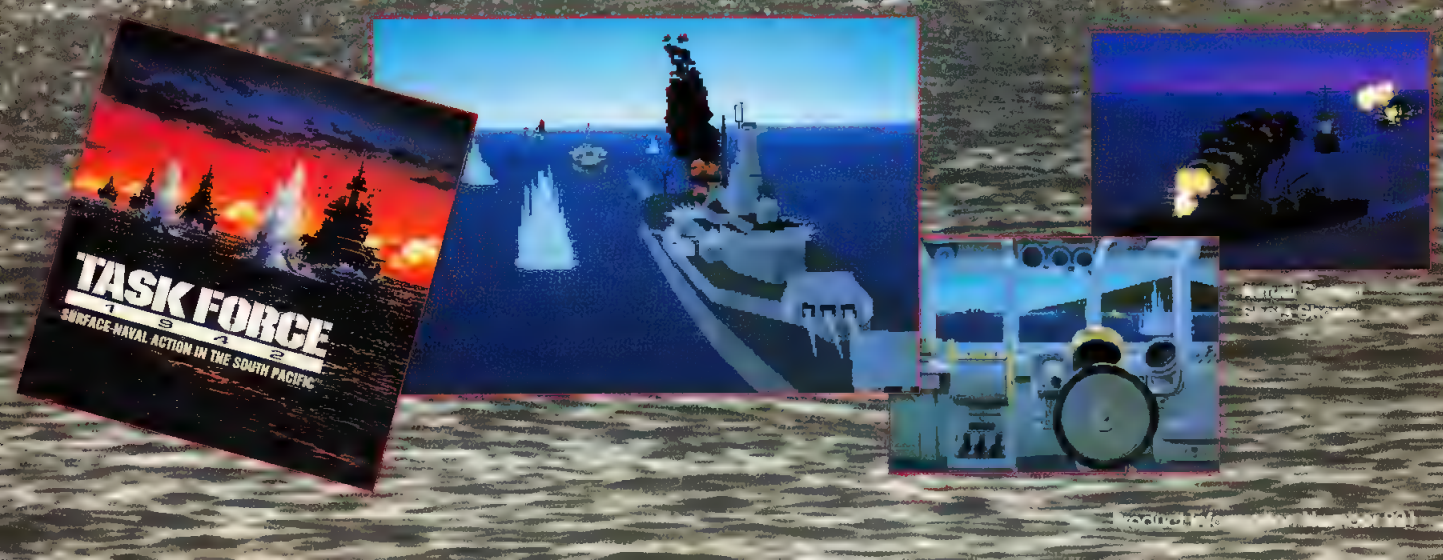


## TRUMP CASTLE 3

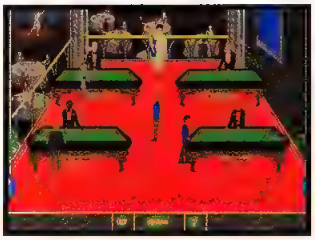
**Capstone** has taken a different approach with this latest installment in its popular *Trump Castle* series. In *Trump Castle 2*, digitized images of the world-famous resort were the focal point

of the presentation. With *Trump Castle 3*, the designers have replaced the digitized pictures with colorful, cartoonlike SVGA graphics (the game can also be played in high-res VGA), and the emphasis is on the games, not the locale.

*Trump Castle 3* features seven casino favorites: baccarat blackjack, craps, poker (5- and 7-card stud, 5-card draw, Texas Hold 'Em, and video poker), roulette, keno, and slots (3- and 5-wheel). An online help function lists the basic rules for each game, but don't look for hints or tips: *Trump Castle 3* has no tutor to help you with strategy or betting techniques. Of course, there's not much strategic depth in games like keno, slots, and video poker, but craps, roulette, poker, and blackjack have nuances that can befuddle even intermediate gamblers, and a nudge in the right direction when playing those games would be appreciated.

But if you already know how to play the games, *Trump Castle 3* will surely satisfy your craving for casino action. The mouse-driven interface is laid out logically, so there's no need to consult the manual before you begin building your simulated fortune. On our 386/DX running at 25 Mhz, the action wasn't blindingly fast, but plenty quick enough to keep us at the table.

Capstone has added several enhancements aimed to make *Trump Castle 3* a much more personal game. There's a "face-building" screen which lets you select skin and hair color, hair style, facial hair, headwear, and more for human players and computer-controlled opponents. At various points during play, a waitress sidles up to the table and in an alluring voice asks if you'd like a cocktail (though her tone becomes rather desultory when she tries to interest you in a game of Keno). It would be nice if you could customize the computer opponents' style of play



for games like poker and blackjack, but as it is they play a fairly solid, if somewhat conservative, game.

The only real flaw in *Trump Castle 3* is in sound-board selection. If you choose the wrong sound board during installation, or replace your old board, you need to re-install the entire program. Other than that, experienced gamblers should delight in *Trump Castle 3*.

*— Stephen Poole*

## DAUGHTER OF SERPENTS

*Daughter of Serpents*, published by **Electronic Arts** and designed by **Milennium**, is one of those games that's both very exciting and a little disappointing at the same time. Under the streets of Cairo lies a cult dedicated to the resurrection of the most destructive gods who ever existed. With

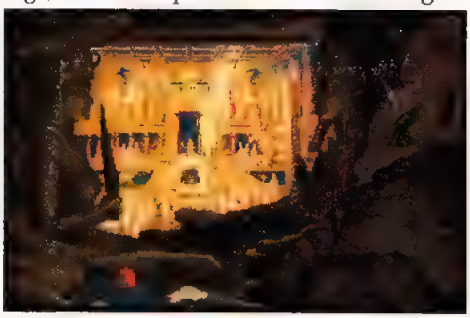
only your wits and the help of a few companions, you have to find and stop them before all hell breaks loose — literally. The graphics have an interesting, atmospheric style, with somber desert tones that give way to glossy, supernatural colors as evil things begin to manifest themselves.

The most exciting part of the game is its design: You begin by creating a character and giving him or her a unique set of skills and knowledge, which in turn determines how you'll approach the game. Whether you decide to play as a police detective, occult investigator, or whatever, there's a different chain of events leading to the discovery and destruction of the murderous cult.

This open-ended approach is a breath of fresh air for graphic adventures, which tend to lock you into a single way of finding solutions. Unfortunately, this great design has been built around one of the shortest adventures I've seen: You'll most likely emerge victorious in less than an hour on your very first attempt

This is probably intentional, so players could have a chance to try all the different kinds of characters. But regardless of the character you use, it's always the *same* mystery. The storylines vary somewhat for each character, but you wind up sitting through certain events each time. Further, the game's non-player characters have a habit of offering solutions if you can't come up with one — it's almost impossible *not* to beat the game, even if you deliberately try some outrageous things.

Had the mystery been deeper, *Daughter of Serpents* would come highly recommended. Still, the designers at Milennium have already won half the battle in creating a great graphic adventure by coming up with an excellent engine

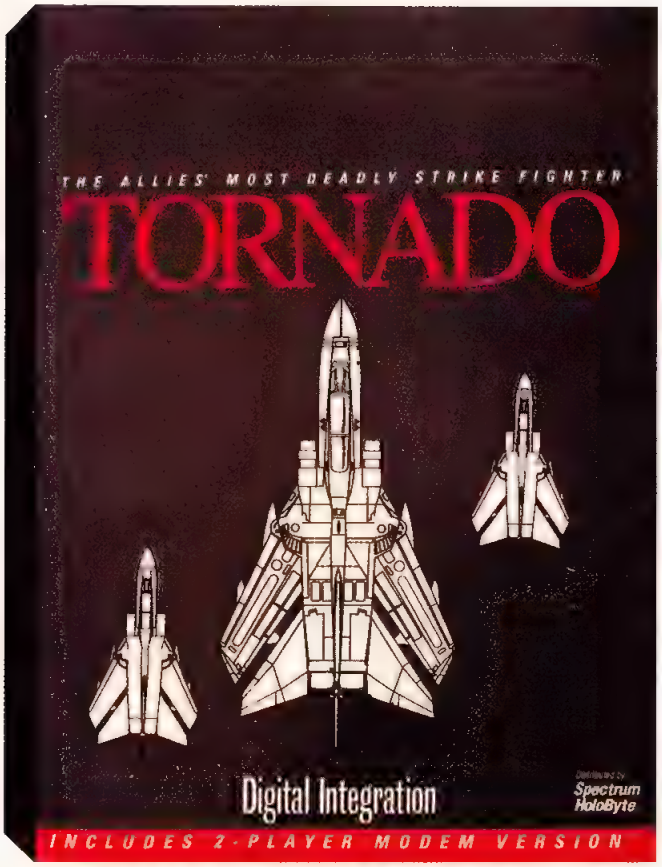


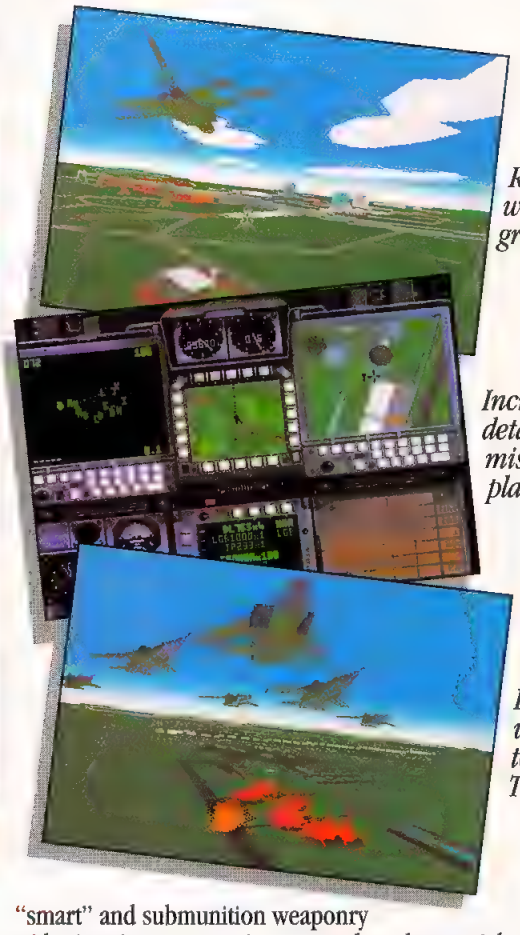
which allows you to fine-tune a game to your own tastes. If it were coupled with more challenging game play, the results could be very impressive.

*— Jeff Lundrigan*

# ALL FLIGHT SIMS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL.

## *Some Are More Real Than Others*



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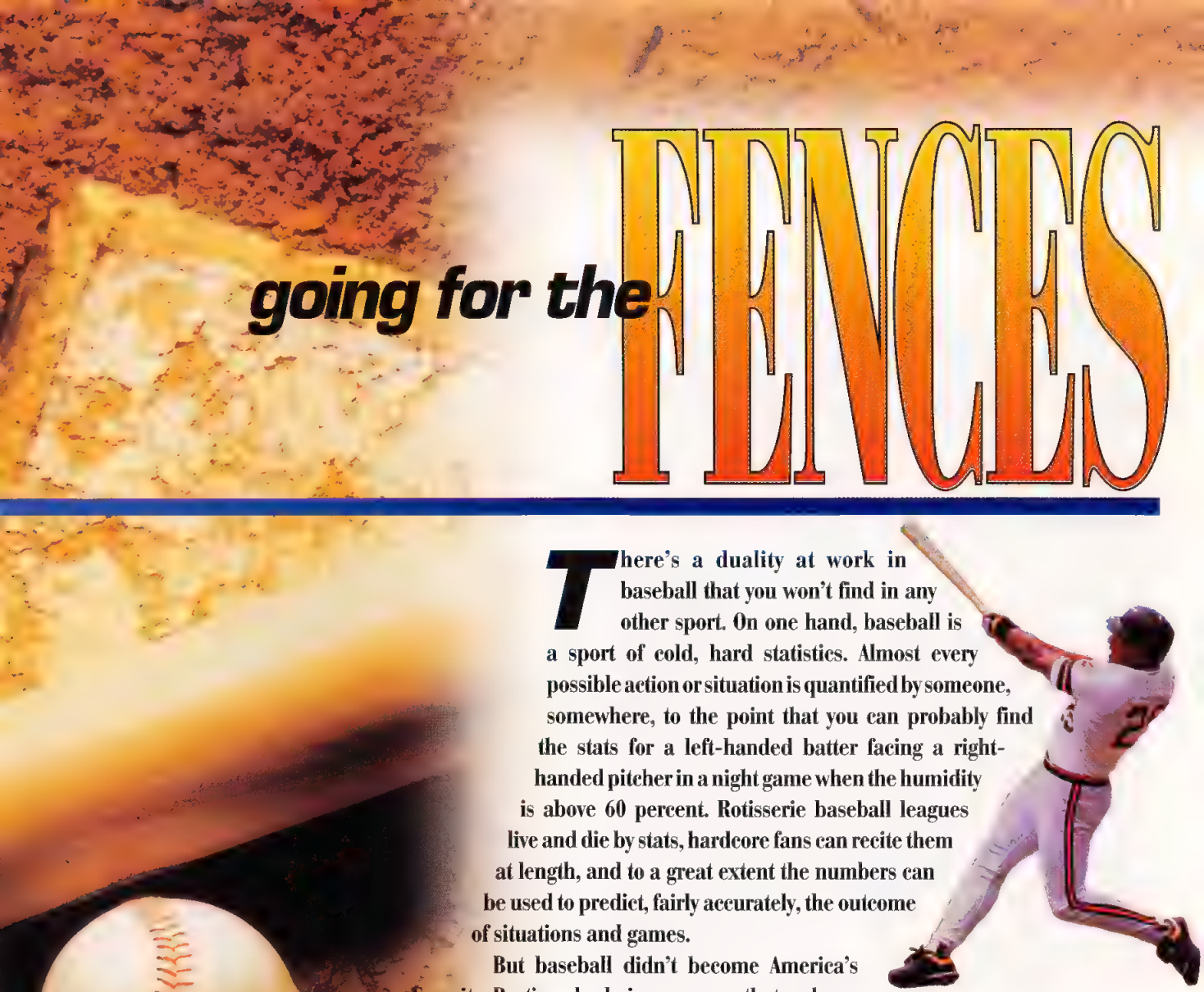
**Product Information Number 112**

# going for the FENCES



There's a duality at work in baseball that you won't find in any other sport. On one hand, baseball is a sport of cold, hard statistics. Almost every possible action or situation is quantified by someone, somewhere, to the point that you can probably find the stats for a left-handed batter facing a right-handed pitcher in a night game when the humidity is above 60 percent. Rotisserie baseball leagues live and die by stats, hardcore fans can recite them at length, and to a great extent the numbers can be used to predict, fairly accurately, the outcome of situations and games.

But baseball didn't become America's Favorite Pastime by being a game that only an actuary could love. There's nothing quite like taking off an afternoon from work, heading out to the ballpark, and enjoying a Coney Island and a cold beer as you cheer your team to victory. Keeping up with the latest stats is well and good, but all those numbers don't equal the magic of actually seeing that ninth-inning sacrifice fly, or a spectacular grab at the center-field fence.

Thankfully for PC gamers who love baseball, the current lineup of baseball sims has something to offer everyone. If simulating the outcome of a meeting between two real-life clubs as realistically and as detailed as possible is enough to bring the game to life for you, the new generation of stats-heavy, text-based games will do the trick. But if you're the sort of fan who loves the action rather than poring over the box score, then two league-leaders—***Hardball III*** and ***Tony LaRussa Ultimate Baseball II***—should be just what you're looking for.

## STRAT-O-MATIC COMPUTER BASEBALL

This product caters to one kind of fan: the baseball buff who couldn't care less about state-of-the-art graphics so long as the game provides statistically accurate results. And that's something *Strat-O-Matic Computer Baseball (SOM)*, from **Strat-O-Matic** most certainly does, thanks to its database

built on in-depth analyses of player performance in numerous statistical and subjective categories. The latest version (4.0) is the first to feature graphics, but the on-field action is still handled by text descriptions alone.

The idea of a text-based baseball game may seem as quaint as a monochrome monitor. But for several reasons, *SOM* and other simulations like it stack up surprisingly well against heavy-hitters such as *Hardball III* and *Tony LaRussa Baseball II*. First and foremost, they play *much* faster — a major advantage when you're involved in a 162-game season replay for one or more teams. In *SOM*, for instance, you can rip through a three-game series in under an hour. Secondly, what these games lack in visual spectacle is more than compensated for by the greater degree of detail and nuance provided by their play-by-play commentaries. Sometimes that old saw about a picture being worth a thousand words just doesn't hold true.

*Strat-O-Matic Baseball*

Gamers who own every edition of *The Baseball Encyclopedia* and can recite Sabermetric formulas by heart will appreciate the precision with which *SOM* attempts to simulate each player's skills. The program takes into account such variables as performance against left- and right-handed batters/pitchers, hitting ability in the clutch, stadium effects, and even the weather (the ball carries farther on hot, humid days). And this new version goes a step further in its quest for realism, adding ground-ball double plays and closer ratings for pitchers.

Besides more stats, the 1993 edition introduces a variety of other enhancements. Most notably, the game now supplements the main text display with background graphics of the stadium where the game is being played. The 16-color palette leaves something to be desired (check out the purple walls at Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Stadium), but the graphics are still an infinite improvement over the alternative, namely a plain black screen with text. There's also an option to add limited animation in the form of digitized images of the pitcher hurling the ball and the hitter swinging the bat.

Another new feature is the Draft-O-Matic utility. This nifty function allows you to draft teams with your friends, with the computer making selections for any club that lacks a human manager. It's perfect for fantasy leagues where you want to maintain a full complement of teams but happen to be short a warm body or two. Draft-O-Matic can also be used to test the extent of your baseball knowledge: Simply draft a team, quick-play through an entire season, and see how your hand-picked squad performs against the computer's teams. The possibilities are as intriguing as they are endless.

*SOM* does have a few quirks, most of them artifacts from the table-top version of the game from which the program is adapted. One of the strangest is that players are susceptible to injuries only when at bat, and then only on line-drive outs. Users also have to contend with the board-game's numerical rating scheme, which doesn't always follow a consistent pattern: lower numbers are better for fielding ability, for example, while the opposite applies for base running. The manual explains the meaning of all the ratings that appear on the screen, but a more common-sense system would have been preferable.

Otherwise, *SOM* offers just about everything that a serious student of the sport could desire: statistical detail, comprehensive stat compiler, programmable computer manager, and built-in scheduler. Above all, it satisfies what might be called the three F's of text-based computer baseball games: it's fast, faithful, and fun.

*— Jeff Seiken*

## PURSUE THE PENNANT

In no other sport can a player's every action be quantified and summarized to the same extent as in baseball. That's why baseball can be so easily adapted to an all-text-and-numbers approach, and of the computer games that follow this format, *Pursue the Pennant (PTP)*, from **Pursue the Pennant**, ranks among the very best.

*PTP* isn't pretty to look at: The game screen consists of nothing but names, numbers, stats, and ratings alongside a schematic representation of the playing field. But for fans who prize statistical accuracy above all else, such a sight is certain to be a satisfying one. The game models player performance from a multitude of angles: Whether it's the pitcher's ability to escape from a jam or the batter's tendency to pull the ball, *PTP*'s database has stats and ratings to recreate every facet of the player's actual performance.

Besides being realistic, *PTP* is also quite easy to play. Newcomers shouldn't have any trouble learning the nomenclature — most of the non-statistical player ratings employ a simple, five-point scale that runs from poor to excellent. The sensible design of the displays is also a big help. The roster screen, for instance, not only lists players, their real-life stats, and the current lineup, but also includes the name of the opposing pitcher and his effectiveness against both left- and right-handed hitters. This sort of detail is a real boon, enabling you to make quick, informed decisions without jumping around among screens. And over the course of several hundred games, little conveniences — or annoyances — such as this can affect your enjoyment to a substantial degree.

Like most stats games, *PTP* is designed for the season-replay crowd. But in addition to giving you accurate results over the long haul, *PTP* is also designed to satisfy those who relish the game-within-a-game aspect of baseball. Both when your team is at bat and in the field, *PTP* provides you with an extensive range of managerial options: You can elect to pitch around the hitter, guard the lines, or bring the corners in, to name just a few of the defensive options available. Better than any of its competitors, *PTP* keeps you thinking, pondering, and calculating on an inning-by-inning basis.

*PTP* stayed busy during the off-season readying version 5 of the program for what will hopefully be an early summer release. Although unavailable for review at the time of this writing, the upgrade promises to refine the game's successful combination of stats and strategy even further. Leading off the changes is a computer manager that will not only be craftier, but also make shrewder use of a team's personnel. The new edition also addresses the one genuine weakness of the program: its limited repertoire of play descriptions. Version five will fix this with an expanded text that should provide for a more entertaining mix of play outcomes than ever before.

The addition of graphics to products like *Strat-O-Matic* and *APBA* signals an important shift in the market of text games, and it wouldn't be surprising if *PTP* follows suit. But regardless of whether it abandons its all-text tradition or not, there can be no doubt about one thing: *Pursue the Pennant* will continue to play a great game of baseball.

*— Jeff Seiken*

# APBA BASEBALL

The new Windows edition of *APBA Baseball* marks a turnaround as dramatic as the 1991 Atlanta Braves' jump from worst to first. That's not to say *APBA* was particularly bad to begin with; in fact, with its seemingly inexhaustible store of play results, the game has always been unsurpassed in its ability to capture the infinite variety and unpredictability of the sport. The colorful text commentary could make even your garden-variety ground ball sound interesting.

But there was also a definite downside to the game. To begin with, it suffered from an interface and screen setup that seemed expressly designed to hinder rather than help users get at the information they wanted. What's more, utilities such as a computer manager and stats compiler that came as standard fare in other games were sold as separate programs with *APBA*, in some cases costing as much if not more than the basic game itself.

But those complaints are history. In its Windows rendition, what was once a diamond in the rough now sparkles with unalloyed brilliance. Crisp, easy-to-understand displays and a mouse-driven, icon-based interface head the list of *APBA*'s new features. The redesigned program is a real joy to play, as it places all critical data in a set of screens accessible with a single click of the mouse. Thinking about inserting a pinch-hitter? Then simply go to the pinch-hitters screen, which lists the batter due up in one window, relevant stats for all available players on the bench in another window, and a concise summary of the game situation in a third. The game could not have made an armchair manager's life any easier.

*APBA Baseball*

Stat, draft, and computer-manager utilities are now included in the basic package, and stadium graphics have also been added — digitized paintings rendered in 256-color SVGA (or high-res 16-color VGA). There are only three stadiums available now (with nighttime graphics for each), but **Miller Associates** hopes to release a separate disk with graphics for all major-league parks. Overall, about the only drawback to the 1993 version of *APBA Baseball* is that it shuts the door on low-end users who lack the horsepower and memory to run Windows. But then progress always carries a price.

The old version of *APBA* didn't factor in player fatigue, essentially relying on human managers to *not* start their ace pitcher in all 162 games. The new Advanced InjuryManagement system, however, puts an end to this problem. Basically, players have endurance ratings based on their actual usage. Overplaying someone to an unrealistic extent diminishes a pitcher's effectiveness and increases the risk of serious injury for all players. At the other extreme, keeping a player on the bench for long periods puts him in a state called "itchy," leading to erratic results when he finally takes the field. The system provides real incentive not only to keep your starters rested, but also to spread the playing time around.

*APBA* lacks the degree of statistical detail as *Strat-O-Matic* and *Pursue the Pennant*, and also gives you a more limited range of managerial decisions to make during play. But these defects barely register in the dazzle of the game's glittering lineup of new features. The *APBA* brain trust has taken full advantage of all that Windows has to offer, and from appearance to responsiveness to actual game play, *APBA Baseball* is a marvelously engineered piece of software. It truly belongs in a league of its own.

*— Jeff Seiken*

# TONY LARUSSA ULTIMATE BASEBALL II

Baseball fans are a demanding breed. In a computer game, they want statistical accuracy, real players to manage, real stadiums in which to play, and real leagues to conquer. Most of those things can be found in *Strat-O-Matic*, *APBA*, and *PTP*, but PC baseball fans don't live in a vacuum. After seeing what's being done graphically in other genres, they want their realism clothed in graphics worthy of the game.

The quest for that perfect marriage of stats and good graphics has bred some solid series, including *Earl Weaver*, *Tony LaRussa*, *Hardball*, and *MicroLeague Baseball*.

*Tony LaRussa Ultimate Baseball II*

When it debuted, **SSI's** *Tony LaRussa Ultimate Baseball* may have been the closest thing available to the ideal baseball simulation: a fairly sophisticated statistical simulation presented with good, if not spectacular, graphics. *Hardball II*, on the other hand, wasn't as strong statistically, but offered unparalleled graphics for its time.

But the most recent incarnations of these two games set new standards for graphical stats-based computer baseball games. *Hardball III* offered excellent graphics, including close-up replays, and added the digitized voice of Al Michaels for the play-by-play. And **Accolade** continued to support the product, offering real major league rosters — with player portraits — and beautifully rendered major-league stadiums.

For a while, *Hardball III*

*Tony LaRussa Ultimate Baseball II*

stood alone at the top of the heap of graphic baseball games. But the recently released *Tony LaRussa II* has erased the gap in graphics quality that separated the original game from *Hardball III* and eclipses the competition as a statistical simulation.

The new *LaRussa* incorporated some of *Hardball III*'s better features, including 256-color graphics, close-up replays, player portraits, and digitized playcalling, this time from announcer Ron Barr. The basic game remains intact, but the menus and options are much easier to access and negotiate, and there are more options available. The addition of pull-down menus, and much-needed mouse support, makes menu selection a breeze. And a set of hot keys allows you to access lineups, batting and pitching statistics, defensive alignments, the box score, and box scores from other league games with a single keystroke.

The major enhancements to game play, aside from improved graphics, include the ability to customize each team's computer manager, and the addition of an All-Star game. The new computer manager is an especially welcome addition. You can customize the manager for each team, assigning tendencies for various pitching, batting, defensive, base-running, and lineup strategies.

The player portraits, though not quite up to the standard of those in *Hardball III*, are a nice touch. But the ones available for the Classic Teams rosters that come with *LaRussa* are generic and few in number, so you'll often find twins or triplets in the same game.

One small but helpful feature is the ability to toggle most stats screens between real-life and simulated stats. The player's batting average and the pitcher's earned run average are displayed for each at-bat, and you can choose which numbers you'd rather see.

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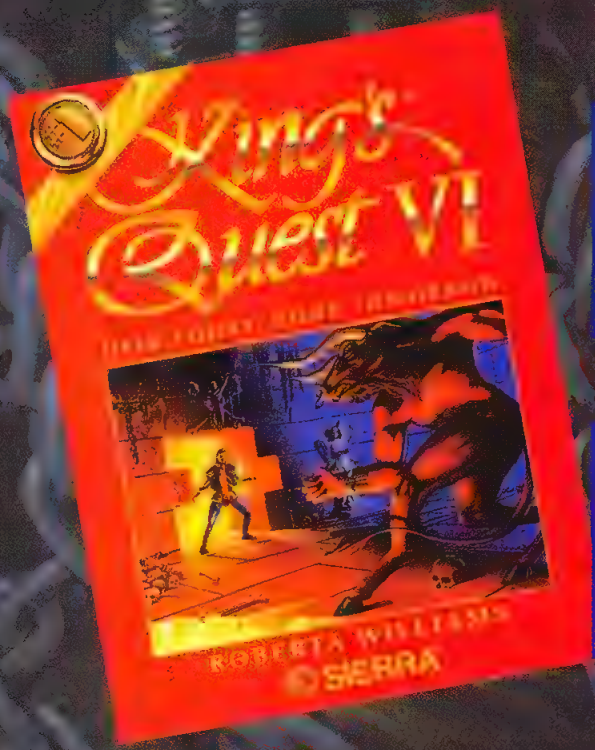


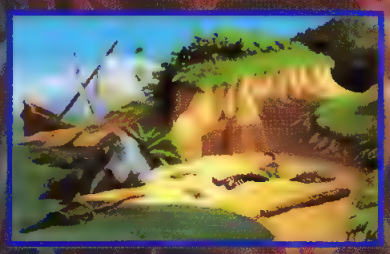

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which players are rated and those accumulated during a simulated season — remain the heart and soul of *LaRussa II*. While some text-based games are able to offer a more sophisticated statistical simulation, *LaRussa II* is on the way to giving them a run for their money. Players are rated in at least 15 different categories, including streak ratings, day

*Tony LaRussa Ultimate Baseball II*

versus night performance, clutch performance, leadership, and morale. And another enhancement rates pitchers for each of four different pitches.

Close-up replays are shown on a giant stadium screen, and while they're interesting for the first couple of games, they get a bit tiresome. The stock replays often don't represent what happened on the field. A double play, for example, is always shown as a 4-6-3 play, regardless of who actually made the play. And the home-run closeup always shows a left-handed batter. Most gamers may find the replays a waste of hard-disk space.

The 11 classic stadiums included in *LaRussa II* are easily the best renditions of ballparks available in a computer game. From the signs on the outfield walls to the cities visible beyond the park, the stadiums come a live, giving the game the ambience of the real thing.

Perhaps even more impressive is the obvious effect the stadiums have on play, just as they do in the big leagues. In Old Yankee Stadium, for instance, left-handed batters can have a field day with the short right-field wall. But in the vast expanse of Sportsman's Park, long drives turn into warning-track outs. Expansion disks with the current major league stadiums and 1992 rosters were scheduled for release shortly after *LaRussa II* hit store shelves.

*— Lee Buchanan*

## HARDBALL III

While SSI was busy revamping LaRussa, Accolade wasn't standing still with *Hardball III*. Two expansion products—1992 Major League Rosters and a Stadiums disk — have made a great game even better. And *Hardball III* retains an edge over its rival in a couple of areas. The closeup view of key plays remains superior to those in *LaRussa II*, though as in *LaRussa II* the initial impact of this feature wears off rather quickly.

The player portraits, in particular, are a strength of *Hardball III*. Unlike the generic portraits of *LaRussa II*, *Hardball III* features accurate depictions of virtually every major league player, bringing the game to life in a way no text-based game could hope to do.

*Hardball III*

And one option in *Hardball III* — a perspective from behind the pitcher — is a nice touch still not found in any other baseball game. The pitcher's view brings a change of pace to the game and makes pitching in the arcade mode much easier. That feature alone gives *Hardball III* the edge over *LaRussa* as an arcade exercise.

But while *Hardball III* still holds the advantage over *LaRussa II* in a few areas, the game strikes out when it tries to be a statistical simulation. To be fair, Accolade basically billed *Hardball III* as an arcade game with great graphics. The company recognized, however, baseball fans' demand for real players who perform like they do in the real world, and responded with the 1992 MLBPA disk.

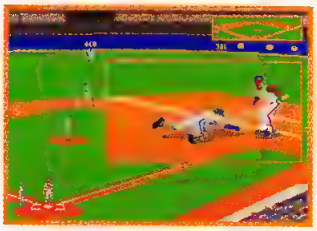
*Hardball III*'s bid to satisfy stat-lovers is, unfortunately, a half-hearted attempt. Players are rated in only five categories to determine their performance. You can derive general information from this data — the real-life home-run hitters will have more power and the real-life base stealers will be faster — but there simply aren't enough numbers for true baseball fanatics. For example, batters aren't rated separately against right- and left-handed pitchers, a sin that many baseball fans might consider unforgivable.

In accumulated stats, too, *Hardball III* can't match *LaRussa II*, but once again, it doesn't try to. *Hardball III* shows the basic accumulated stats for each player — batting average, home runs, RBIs, steals for batters and base-runners, wins, losses, and ERAs for pitchers. But if you want to know if your center fielder's 38 home runs is tops in the league, you're out of luck. And that's the sort of information that baseball fans live for.

*Hardball III*'s most serious flaw, however, is a curious lack of offense. Home runs, and even extra-base hits, are far too rare. The vast majority of runs are scored on four consecutive singles. A typical game is a 2-1, extra-inning affair, with a linescore showing 2 runs on 14 hits. That's not baseball, and it's an error that Accolade should remedy.

Though they differ in approach, *LaRussa II* and *Hardball III* share many features and strengths. Both offer excellent arcade and manage-only modes. Replaying a major-league schedule is easy in both games, letting the player manage or control one team while the computer plays out the rest of the schedule.

On the down side, both games suffer from some annoying tendencies common to most graphical baseball simulations. Unlike sports with more random action, like football and basketball, baseball is in many ways a precise game. Certain plays almost always produce the same results. For example, a base hit with two outs and a runner on second will almost certainly yield a score, since the runner will take


*Hardball III*

off as soon as the pitch was thrown. But in both these otherwise excellent games, that runner usually won't score from second, unless he has great speed. That might seem like a minor flaw to someone only marginally interested in baseball. But to a baseball fan, it's downright infuriating.

Another problem evident in both games (particularly *LaRussa II*) is a difficulty in graphically representing a stats-based result. A base hit might roll to the warning track or bounce off the outfield wall and result in a single. That would be a rare sight in real life.

Those defects are irritating, to be sure, but in truth they do little to detract from the excellent sequel to the original *LaRussa*. We think it's the closest thing yet to the perfect computer baseball game. And as SSI has rallied to take the lead, *Hardball III* remains a fine product, offering first-rate graphics and smooth play. With this sort of competition, we can't wait to see *Hardball IV*.

*— Lee Buchanan*

GP

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# DARK SUN: A BRAVE NEW WORLD FOR AD&D

BERNIE YEE

Time and time again, polls of PC gamers have shown that the most popular genre of entertainment software is fantasy role-playing. And of all the FRP's available for the PC, perhaps none are as widely played or as well-known as the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons line from **SSI**. Why? Because many computer FRP fans cut their teeth on both the Dungeons & Dragons and Advanced Dungeons & Dragons pen-and-paper games from TSR, and while there are other notable FRP series available for the PC, none are as instantly familiar to FRP veterans as the AD&D games.

## IN THE BEGINNING

The seminal AD&D series made its computer debut in the form of *Pools of Radiance*, a game originally designed for the Commodore 64, and one which went on to become a huge hit. Unlike the pen-and-paper AD&D games, which take place in the Greyhawk universe, *Pools of Radiance* is set in the Forgotten Realms. With its Medieval atmosphere, the Forgotten Realms game world was indicative of the efforts of TSR and SSI to bring AD&D to the masses; the differences between good and evil were much more cut-and-dried in the Forgotten Realms, and it lacked the gritty realism of Greyhawk. Because all of SSI's subsequent AD&D games (with the exception of *Eye of the Beholder I* and *II*) featured similar packaging — a gold-trimmed box with enticing artwork — the series was dubbed the "Gold Box" line. And all the Gold Box games, from *Pools of Radiance* through 1992's *Dark Queen of Krynn*, used basically the same game system.

When AD&D made its way onto IBM PCs, 80286 processors were considered standard, and VGA graphics were only beginning to become popular. Even so, the EGA graphics and rudimentary PC-speaker beeps of the Gold Box games underutilized the power of the average PC. But while the Gold Box games didn't push the technological envelope, certain game elements were both quite enjoyable and playable. The Gold Box combat system allowed all the tactical nuances of combat to shine through, eclipsing even the pen-and-paper methods—not surprising, since combat is essentially number-crunching, and number-crunching is what computers do best. Combat was phased (not in real time), and when it occurred, the game screen switched from the crude first-person travelling perspective to an overhead isometric view of your combat area: Characters could run and hide behind trees, cast spells and shoot arrows, and draw steel to kill the old-fashioned way.

The other notable feature of the Gold Box series was the fun plots of most of the games, presented in the form of a hardcopy journal full of entries. This came as no surprise; after all, TSR has made more dungeon-campaign modules than you could shake a Staff of Striking at. The SSI Gold Box games had interesting, if somewhat predictable, storylines which tended to have a thematic center of "kill the big bad guy." The problem was in the execution of these plots: It worked for Tolkien, but computer FRP's lack the subtlety and flexibility to make that formula new with each sequel and installment. Worse yet, the plots were often very linear, so gamers got the sense that they were being led around on a leash to the next goal.

Trundling around in search of the Evil One was punctuated by endless combat, and in addition to set encounters, random encounters threatened to overwhelm all but the most dazed gamer's patience. Eventually, the Gold Box series wore out its welcome. Sales fell dramatically after the release of 12 different games, all with the same antiquated engine which barely supported automapping;

the dearth of actual puzzle-solving, not to mention non-player character (NPC) interaction, didn't help matters. Admirably, SSI remained steadfast in their support of the series by allowing you to import characters from game to game. But SSI's competitors were coming out with new installments in popular lines such as Ultima, Might & Magic, and Wizardry; each new installment heralded a new advance in computer FRP technology. All Gold Box could do was add some VGA graphics and digitized sounds.

## JUST LIKE STARTING OVER

But things are about to change in the AD&D world. Though *Dark Sun: Shattered Lands* is arriving rather late — it likely won't hit the shelves until one year after its original target release date — it looks to be a game worth waiting for, with an engine that pushes SSI's super-popular AD&D license back to the front of the pack (though not necessarily on the cutting edge). The first installment introduces gamers to the Dark Sun universe, a metaphor for our waste of the vast natural gifts on our planet.

In a world where magic and the environment have gone awry, characters are much more potent than their experience levels would allow them to be in any Gold Box game, but they must survive in a land where life can be nasty, brutish, and short. The nature of the races has been subverted, so that halflings have become savage cannibals and elves are now shifty thieves. Dark Sun is a desert world (not yet quite like Dune) laid waste by the power-hungry rule of Defilers, a class of archmage sorcerer-kings and their followers. The self-serving Defilers cast magic the easy way, by draining life from the earth itself, and seem to prolong their life by similarly blasphemous means. Preservers are environmentally conscious wizards who can cast the same spells as Defilers, but they don't gain experience levels as quickly as Defilers because of the greater skill required to cast without harming the biosphere.

Players can only become Preservers in *Dark Sun*. The games take place at a critical moment in the world's lifeline — a movement has arisen to overthrow these tyrants, who, if unchecked, will lay waste to their planet. You're at the forefront of this vanguard that will restore some of nature's fading health. SSI hopes to be able to reflect both the destruction and the healing of the land around you as you explore throughout the Dark Sun series. The effects of spells are displayed in a fashion similar to its Gold Box predecessor, except that the graphics are more refined. Magical fogs have height and substance — a human walking through magical mist will have his head bob above the fog, the mist will only go up to a half-giant's waist. This sort of complexity is no surprise, as magic is the order of the day.

The Dark Sun universe is an appropriate and compelling setting for the harsh business reserved for heroes and heroines. *Dark Sun* is a Second Edition AD&D campaign, which means there are several refinements in place. The best change is that non-human characters (elves, dwarves, and the like) are no longer limited in advancement as they were in the Gold Box system. Before, if a gamer created an elf fighter/magic user, this character was limited to advancing to 7th Level fighter/11th Level Magic user; by the time the other members in his party reached the 18th Level, he was pretty much dead weight (an example of xenophobia raising its ugly head even in role-playing land!).

Magic isn't the only area where Gold Box veterans will find enhancements. *All* characters have some psionic ability, in addition to those who choose to train exclusively as a member of the Psionicist class. And there are several new races as well: The mul is a half-human, half-dwarf race that's been bred as gladiators; the warlike thri-kreen is an insect race with a strong resemblance to a mantis; and there's the half-giant, a huge, magical, miscegenated being with tremendous strength. Of course, the

misuse of magic has mutated many of the lifeforms in *Dark Sun*, and even humans may have a strange appearance. Dark Sun characters can be improbably powerful; a half-giant can be as strong as a storm giant in the traditional AD&D world. Since there are no gods in Dark Sun, clerics draw their power from the four elemental planes. Metal and water are scarce, and until you find metal weapons, yours are always in danger of breaking.

## NEW WORLD, NEW LOOK

*Dark Sun* will remind many players of *Ultima VII*, with its icon-oriented, mouse-driven interface and full-screen graphic display. The large game world, which consists of 45 regions each made up of 60 screens, should take up 60-100 hours of your leisure time; thankfully, SSI has implemented a cumulative automapping system that records your every movement. They've also provided an on-line journal that records vital information and even allows you to type in your own notes. Your characters begin at third level (it's not a friendly world), as slaves battling in the arena. After escaping from the slave pens and heading into the wilderness (mostly desert with old ruins), you eventually enter three villages neighboring the evil city-state. Venturing into the city may be reserved for a future installment, as your characters never advance beyond the 9th level and are no match for any sorcerer-king. Your ultimate goal is to create an alliance to raise an army against the sorcerer-king.

SSI has taken the emphasis away from the hack 'n' slash so prevalent in the Gold Box games, focusing instead on interaction, cooperation, and survival — the keys to defeating the sorcerer-kings and saving the world of Dark Sun. And they've aimed to keep their vaunted storylines (there are 60,000 words of text in the game, all of which can be recorded in your journal) while allowing them to be more thoroughly fleshed-out with the greater interaction available in this new engine. NPCs, like objects, now have their own existence in Dark Sun; they walk around, talk to you, and interact much as in the Ultima games.

Your party can consist only of four characters, and though NPCs may aid you in combat, no one will join your party for extended travels. Objects have physical qualities, though not to the fastidious extent that Ultima gamers may be accustomed to. Since magic is of a twisted and mutable nature, many magic items are unique to this game (no more K-Mart Bracers of AC 4!). And thanks to the overhead isometric view, combat retains its tactical, phased nature, better than the real-time action becoming more common in FRPs.

The hardware requirements for *Dark Sun*, though steep at first glance, don't stand out as being unreasonable in this age of rapidly advancing technology. You'll need a 386 or better to run the game, as well as 2 megs of RAM, VGA, and a mouse. *Dark Sun* takes up 15 megs of hard drive real estate — a sizable amount, but not record-breaking. There's extensive soundboard support, including General MIDI supported by the great new WaveBlaster card.

SSI looks to amortize the cost of developing the Dark Sun engine by coming out with at least two more games in this series, possibly another Dark Sun trilogy, and science-fiction games (like *Vortex*, previously announced as *M*), as well as other potential SSI and outside projects. The engine is versatile, and while it's not technologically groundbreaking, it is extremely well-thought out and powerful enough to last for several campaigns before showing its age.

SSI's strategy with this new engine is clear: retain the best aspects of the Gold Box games while bringing the other elements up-to-date. But best of all, SSI has chosen an interesting and compelling milieu to drive the engine; gamers will find themselves totally immersed in their characters' efforts to save their almost-doomed world from the rapacious sorcerer-kings. If all goes well, *Dark Sun* should prove a boon to gamers' libraries as well as SSI's coffers. The Gold Box is dead; long live Dark Sun!

**GP**

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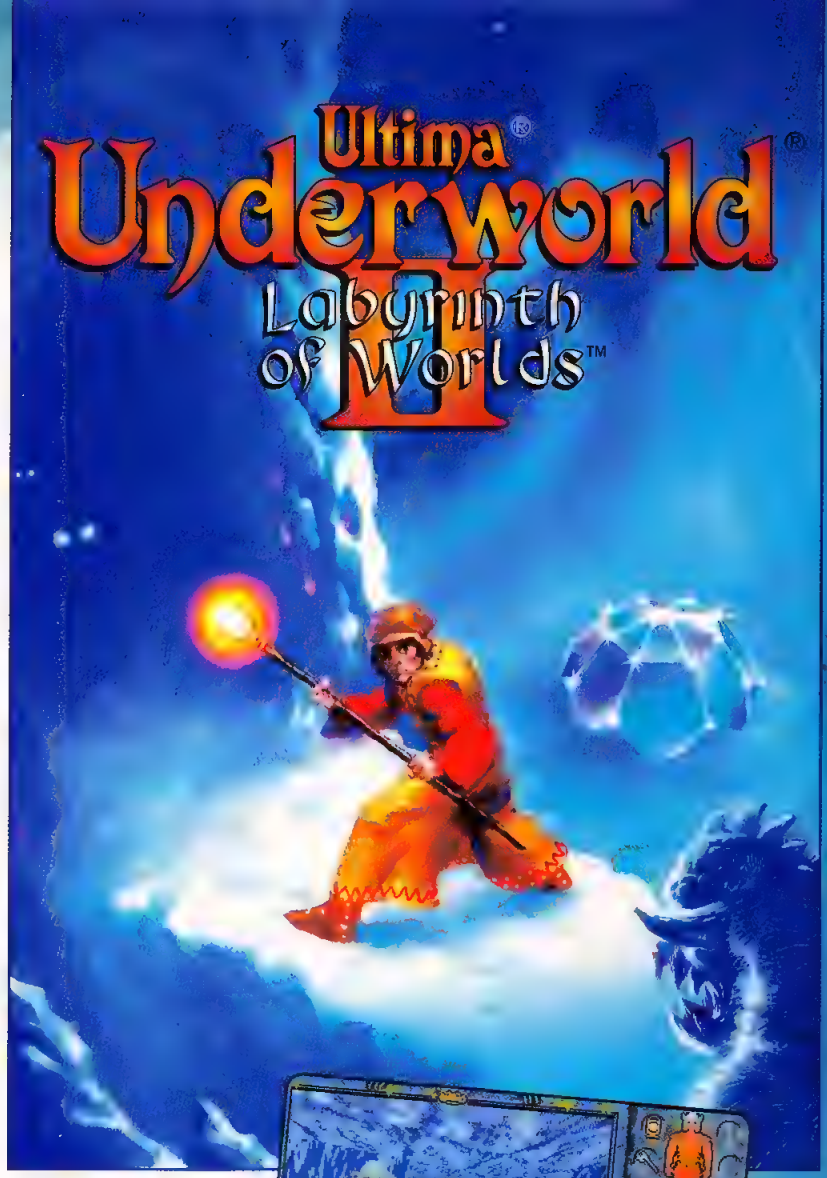

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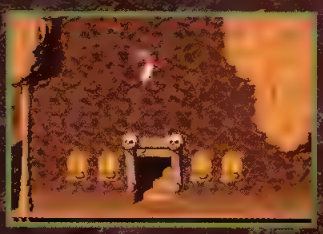
# The Shadow And The Flame

## Prince of Persia II: A Sequel Fit For A King (Or At Least A Very Athletic Prince)



STEPHEN POOLE

When **Broderbund** brought *Prince of Persia* to the PC nearly three years ago, the game was universally lauded as having the most realistic animation ever seen in a computer entertainment title. Indeed, in the pages of this magazine *Prince of Persia* was viewed as a watershed release: "If this is a sample of what lies ahead for computer action games, then bring on the future!"

Like many outstanding games, the plot was simple. As a young prince in a foreign land, you are imprisoned in a dungeon by Jaffar, the Grand Vizier, for falling in love with the Sultan's daughter, whom the Vizier intends to marry. Jaffar has given the Princess only one hour to choose between death or marriage to him, so that's how long you have to fight, leap, and climb your way upward through the dungeon for a final showdown with your jailer.

What made *Prince of Persia* so appealing was its splendid blend of arcade action and brain-teasing puzzles. Wide chasms and gnashing blades had to be avoided as you searched for pressure pads to open secret doors and passageways. Breakaway floors and ceilings could collapse on a pressure pad (or *you*), and knowing when and how to use the crumbling rock to your advantage made the puzzles even more challenging. And while all this was going on, you had to be quick with your blade—Jaffar's guards roamed the entire prison, knowing it would cost them their necks if they didn't return with your head.

Despite the great puzzles, though, the star of *Prince of Persia* was the animation. *Prince* designer Jordan Mechner filmed actors performing various movements and used the footage as basis for the animations — a relatively new technique at the time — and the result was movement so lifelike that it's still impressive today. So when we heard about *Prince of Persia II: The Shadow and The Flame*, we jumped at the chance to get an early look at the game, as well as talk with Mechner about the work that's gone into making *Prince of Persia II* a sequel worthy of its name.

## Second Time Around

While Mechner was pleased with *Prince of Persia*, he's the first to point out that the game wasn't all that he had envisioned, for a couple of reasons. "In making *Prince* there were just so many ideas that I had to cut out of the game, either because there wasn't time or because the original version was done on the Apple II, a 128K machine with one floppy drive and two colors. I just had a folder full of ideas and sketches...stuff that I really wanted to include but which didn't make it into the game. And the quality of graphics, sound, and artwork that go into computer games now made revisiting *Prince* a very attractive proposition."

Not surprisingly, talk of a sequel began very soon after the completion of the PC version of *Prince of Persia*. "We were talking about it up until around August of 1991," notes Mechner," and that's when it really crystallized. I wrote up a detailed screenplay with storyboards and game designs, and after agreeing on a design Broderbund started work on it. So basically it's been in development a year and a half."

One of the few complaints gamers had with *Prince of Persia* was the sameness of the dungeon graphics. "A lot of people thought the game had great animation, but that the backgrounds got boring after a while," says Mechner, "and I kind of felt that way, too. But the truth is that I used most of the computer's memory animating the character on-screen, and the backgrounds were kind of simple and schematic."

That charge can't be lev-

eled at the sequel, though, thanks in large part to the expanded storyline. At the end of *Prince of Persia*, the Sultan gave the prince his daughter's hand in marriage. But in *The Shadow and the Flame*, Jaffar has cast a spell on the prince so that both the Sultan and the princess think Jaffar is her husband. The game follows the prince as he escapes by crashing through a palace window, runs along the rooftops of the city, and manages to leap onto a ship just pulling out of port. When the ship sinks, the prince swims to shore, then enters a series of dangerous caverns. From there it's on to a ruined palace, a temple, and back to the city.

Mechner points out that with a few exceptions — the prince can now lie flat, crawl, turn around after drawing his sword, and throw an item — character animation was carried over nearly intact from the original. But that wasn't really a drawback, since the animation was so far ahead of its time, and it meant much more effort could be devoted to storyline, puzzles, and background graphics. With several graphic artists and assistants working on various portions of the project, making seamless transitions between the different game environments (five in all) presented a major challenge.

"Basically there were three major artists who did the bulk of the work, with others helping them, so making the styles of three different people fit together was a major concern. Think about it: You have characters done by one person appearing against backgrounds done by someone else, and the prince walks onscreen and there's *another* background done by yet a third person — you can see why we were so concerned with continuity."

## COME ONE, COME ALL

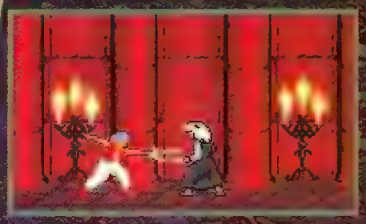
Judging from the preview version we've been playing for the past two weeks, Mechner and company have reason to rejoice. Though the game takes place in a 2-D environment, the artists have used shading and texturing to create highly attractive backgrounds with a 3-D feel. The music and sound effects are vastly improved over the first game as well: The soundtrack has a hypnotic Middle-Eastern flair, and the digitized sound effects — the metallic clanking of swords, the crashing sound of falling rocks, and the terrifying shrieks of slain guards — all serve to bring the game world to vivid life.

Players will also appreciate the new enemies and obstacles the prince encounters: In addition to Jaffar's guards, there are poisonous snakes, flying medusa-heads, deadly cannons, and slashing scimitars. Potions in the first game either increased or decreased your health; now they might give you the power to defy gravity, or literally turn things upside down. And the puzzles are more numerous and even more deliciously difficult than before: There's a lot more here than a prince with a razor-sharp sword and a Carl Lewis complex.

In a move that's becoming increasingly rare, Mechner and the Broderbund team designed *Prince of Persia II* so that it could be played on a 286: "Believe it or not, it actually runs on a 286, but it's kind of slow. But at the time we began development, we felt there were a lot of people out there with 286's, and it seemed like the right thing to do." We played the game on a 386/SX with 1 meg of RAM running at 16 MHz — considered by many a basic entry-level machine — and with only a few exceptions game play was smooth and satisfying.

Living up to the standard set by an all-time classic like *Prince of Persia* wasn't easy, but it looks as though Mechner and the talented artists and programmers at Broderbund were up to the task. After all, who else could make you look forward to rescuing the princess again?

GP



# EMPIRE STRIKES BACK!

WILLIAM R. TROTTER

Three or four years ago, I took a phone call from a friendly colleague, an editor for another magazine. After I said "Hello," he said, "So, Trotter — whatcha doing?" "Oh, just taking a ten-minute break to play a few turns of *Empire*," I replied. "You lie like a dog," my friend chortled.

"What do you mean?"

"Because there's *no such thing as playing Empire for only ten minutes!!*"

He was right, of course. *Empire* addiction is a serious problem, one that can interfere with many other, more practical activities — such as making one's deadlines. Year after year, the game makes the list of all-time greats. It's a classic, with internal balance like a Swiss watch, arresting playability, seemingly endless user-permutations capable of generating short, bloody wars that play out with all the frenzy of a closet full of starving Rottweilers...and it's also capable of generating truly Homeric struggles that go on for days and days and days....

For the benefit of readers who may not have played *Empire*, it's a game of planetary exploration, expansion, and all-out war. You start with a single city on a blacked-out map, explore to find other cities, then set up production schedules for various types of weapons you'll need to triumph over the human or computerized opponents also vying for control of the same planet. Cannon-fodder units such as infantry can be cranked out quickly; battleships take much, much longer.

The creators of the original game, Mark Baldwin and Walter Bright, got thousands of letters from fans all over the country, suggesting ways this already-superb game could be made even more compelling and bloodthirsty. It has always been assumed that a sequel or an upgrade of *Empire* would sooner or later appear, and indeed, such a product has been announced several times in the past two years, only to fade tantalizingly from sight.

Now it's here, in the form of *Empire Deluxe*, designed by Mark Baldwin and Bob Rakosky and published by **New World Computing**. Is it as good as the original? You bet; it's still *Empire* and it's still one great war game. But is it *better?* Well, it certainly looks better: the SVGA graphics offer a level of detail undreamed of when *Empire* first appeared (VGA is also supported). But looks aren't everything, so without trying to be exhaustive, here's a comparison of the new and old versions, grouped according to the two main types of activity that take place in the game.

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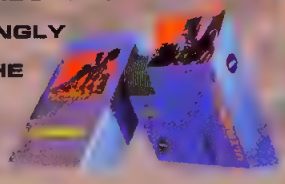

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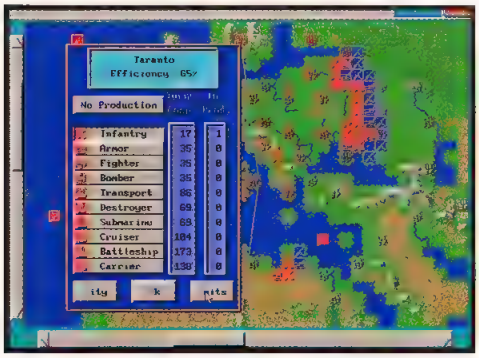
# EXPANSION AND PRODUCTION

• **Narrative Hook:** The old game was presented with a goofy science-fiction motif, with the armies assigned dumb names like "Barsoomians." The whole gimmick was quite irrelevant to the game (technologically advanced aliens are unlikely to mass-produce *battleships*) and it always seemed kind of silly. In *Empire Deluxe*, your opponents are named for real generals. Much manlier.

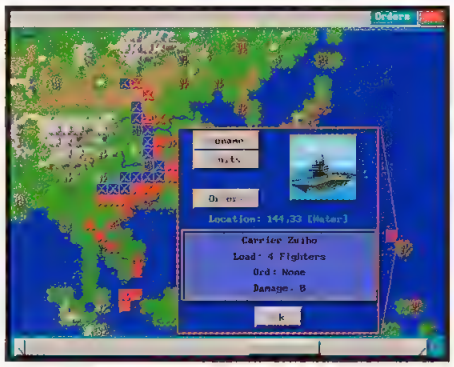



• **Map Size:** Maps in the original were limited to 60-by-100 squares, and all the worlds were flat, with impassable borders. The maps in *Empire Deluxe* have optional wrap-around, and can be sized up to 150-by-200 squares. This makes for an incredibly big playing area, actually *too* big for a two-sided game: I played a game against a single computer enemy on a map that size, and 181 turns passed before there was even a clash of patrol units, and well over 200 before a real battle developed. On the other hand, it works adequately in games with three or four opponents.

• **Production Rates:** These were standardized in the old game; in *Empire Deluxe* they vary wildly from city to city, with 100 percent being the game average, and many cities lower or higher. Some cities specialize in certain units, cranking out submarines, for instance, 20 percent faster than other cities, but creating *other* units more slowly. Taking a city totally off-line — assuming you're willing to run that risk — will increase its efficiency by about one percent each turn. These new production rules put an interesting spin on certain games, but I'll have to live with the program a lot longer before I can tell if they make the game better or just fussier.

• **Expansion:** Discovering new territory is much easier now; just command a unit to Explore and it automatically moves around in the most efficient way possible, stopping only when it encounters a city or the enemy. The Move To and Patrol commands make routine chores easier as well.

• **Neutral Cities:** These were easy pickings in the original, but they're treated as tough objectives in *Empire Deluxe*. It's quite possible for an entire transport load of units to be annihilated trying to take a single city. Fortunately, it works like that for all players.




• **Handicapping:** Handicapping in the new version is set up by picking an adjective (from "slight" to "severe"), instead of adjusting the sliding bars to new percentages. In practice, it works out to the same thing, but the old system gave the illusion of a finer degree of control.

# COMBAT

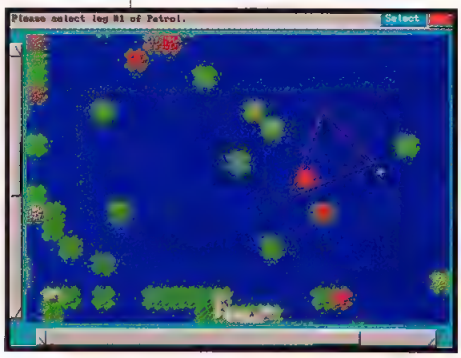
• **New Units:** *Empire Deluxe* includes armor (twice as fast and twice as tough as infantry),

and bombers (capable of tactical or strategic use). In addition, any ground unit can turn itself into an "airbase" on any patch of level ground. In some games, this makes no difference at all — in others, it can be crucial.

• **Terrain:** Landscape is now more varried, with rough, clear, river, forest, and mountain squares. Terrain affects defensive strength and movement, in the standard sort of ways every war-gamer is familiar with.

• **Difficulty Levels:** There are three levels of play: Basic, Standard, and Advanced. Veterans of the earlier *Empire* can probably jump right into the advanced level without doing more than skimming the manual. Beginners, however, will appreciate the simplified games and the excellent documentaion.

• **Scenarios:** In the advanced game files, there are some very interesting pre-set games, including a dandy "Operation Sea Lion" game and two enormous World War II scenarios. This is like getting a half-dozen games in one. Very nice.




# ROLLING YOUR OWN

The Game Editor utility works almost identically to the earlier one, although it's a bit more complicated because of the more elaborate rules for production and terrain. If you like world-building, you'll spend a lot of time here.

There is, however, one glaring flaw in *Empire Deluxe* left over from the original. When you design a fantasy scenario, usually to test some whimsical offensive or defensive strategy, the whole experiment may depend on your starting location. In neither *Empire* or *Empire Deluxe* can you select a starting-city, which means you have to quit and restart until the computer chooses to begin the game where *you* want it to begin, more or less.

Well, OK, so it's not perfect. And yes, it's no longer the only such game in town. But it's still *Empire*, and it's still a classic.

GP

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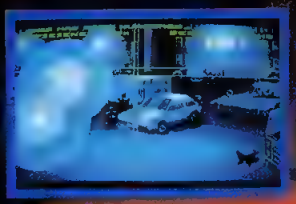

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*The name of the game*

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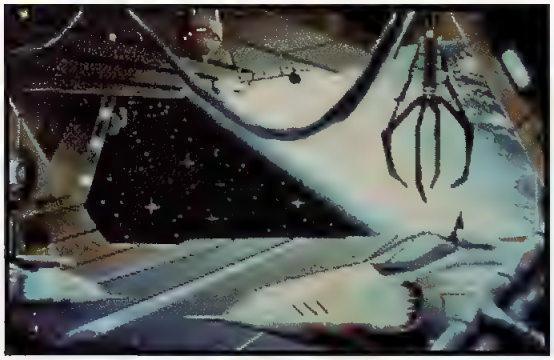
Product Information Number 100

# ALTERNATE LIVES

## KEEPING UP WITH *KOSHAN*

**NEIL RANDALL**



If you played **Ubi Soft**'s *B.A.T.* from a couple years ago, you experienced a rare event: a truly unique role-playing game. Nearly everything about it was unusual: the graphics, the windowing system for issuing commands and manipulating items, the interaction among characters — even the variety of possible activities was uncommon. *B.A.T.* was a difficult game to play, but because it was so different it was easy to forgive, at least somewhat, some of the game's clumsier elements.

Now Ubi Soft has released *The Koshan Conspiracy*, and it's essentially *B.A.T.*, volume 2. Every aspect of the game system has been improved from the first volume, and yet the original *B.A.T.* system is very much in place. You're still cast in the role of an agent of the Bureau of Astral Troubleshooters (which is what *B.A.T.* stands for), and you still find yourself in the middle of an espionage-based science-fiction plot. As in *B.A.T.*, you have to think your way through a number of puzzles, and also as in *B.A.T.* it's not always apparent what you're supposed to be doing. But the gaming environment is interesting enough to rise above *Koshan*'s design difficulties and keep you playing.

Your task in *The Koshan Conspiracy* is to discover and procure enough deeds for Bedhin 6, a moon of the planet Shedisan, to claim ownership. Bedhin 6 is the source of the majority of Echiatone 21, the most vital resource for the Shedisan planet. Through a well-orchestrated scam, a Shedisan judge has ruled that the Koshan Trust, the bad guys who own the majority of the deeds, must stop mining the Echiatone until the ownership question is settled. As a B.A.T. agent, you must recover as many deeds as you can over the course of a few days.

It's crucially important to keep this goal foremost in your mind. There's a lot of territory to explore in this game, and if you're not careful you'll find yourself wandering rather than accomplishing. This situation isn't helped at all by the fact that it's almost never completely obvious what you should be doing next: It's entirely possible to get off to a slow start in *The Koshan Conspiracy* and never pick up the pace, simply because the specifics of your mission aren't revealed. When you start the game you can head straight for your first liaison — the documentation even tells you how — but your first contact is hardly a bonanza of information. And that's how it goes through at least the first several hours of play.

But before you can even get that far, you might encounter some problem with the interface. When you load *Koshan*, you're liable to find yourself caught in a kind of endless loop, where you can't seem to get the game to start no matter what you do. Alternatively, you might find it impossible to enter the character creation system. If this happens, here's what to do. When you see the CREATION/GAME menu, press and hold the left mouse button to enter the game, or press and hold the right mouse button to force the cursor to the CREATION line of the menu. The left button then takes you into character creation mode. This all seems easy enough, but it's extremely frustrating when you can't seem to make anything happen.

Because of the difficulty in accessing character creation, you might get well into the game without even knowing what B.A.T. agent you're working with. You can do fairly well with a predefined character, but the game's more fun with a character of your own choosing, and at the first opportunity you should stop your current game and make a character for yourself. It's not a particularly easy process, but training your new self for eight Shedisan weeks makes it clear that this game's focus is on the relationship between your agent's characteristics and his/her current situation. This is best demonstrated

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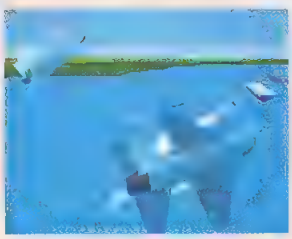

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by the possibility of "sensory" training, in which you develop the agent's perception and reflexes.

But then it's on to the game, and this is where *The Koshan Conspiracy* will either entrance or repulse you. If your first reaction is the latter — and for a number of players it almost certainly will be — you really owe it to yourself to give the game a chance. *Koshan* is big and in some ways needlessly difficult, but it still has a considerable amount to recommend it.

You begin the adventure at the Shedisan spaceport in the city of Roma II. The history of Shedisan, included in the documentation, explains the city's name and its social system, which is derived from ancient Rome; knowing how it works is useful when dealing with the inhabitants. There are both Humans and Shedish to deal with, and you'll even run into some slaves. Orders and castes define who has control over what, and while strictly speaking the game doesn't force you to understand the system, you'll find many instances where a knowledge of it helps.

The spaceport looks more or less like a train station, and from here you can either enter this sector of Roma II or hop on the VIA-Express transportation system and try another area. You can also rent a spaceship, but it's too expensive to even dream about in the early stages. Instead, just follow the "Starting the Game" sequence on the Quick Reference Card to find your way to the Mantoue Manoir hotel. There you'll meet Sylvia Hadford, another B.A.T. agent, who will give you instructions, a credit card (crucial!) and an important pass. Your mission has started.

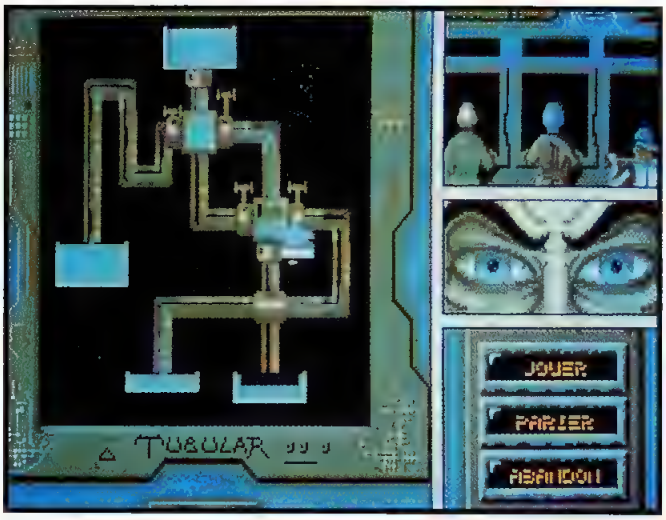
But here's where *Koshan* begins to frustrate. You find out from Hadford that you must head for an information center and learn more about the deeds for Bedhin 6. By asking her and some other people you meet, you can make your way to the information center, but from this point on it's extremely difficult to figure out what to do next. As it turns out — and you probably won't realize this for a long while — heading straight for the information center is by no means the best thing to do. Rather, you should meet as many people as you can, gather as much money as you can, and try to recruit people to work with you as a party. It's even advisable to find, buy, and distribute videophones, in order to keep in touch with the people you've recruited.

There's more. You'll discover almost immediately that, while you can talk to humans with no trouble, Shedish citizens speak a different language. To understand them, you'll have to program your B.O.B. (Bidirectional Organic Bioputer), which is implanted in your left arm. The programming isn't incredibly difficult, but the fact that instructions on it take up 28 of the manual's 65 pages manual indicates how important this item is. It's not actually necessary to program it at all, but not doing so will prolong both the playing time and your frustration during game play.

You might be thinking that most everything I've said so far has been negative, but the truth is that *Koshan* is the most difficult RPG I've encountered in the last few years (ever since *B.A.T.*, in fact). The difficulty, however, lies almost exclusively in the fact that it's impossible to know what you're supposed to do, until you've either played the game for many hours, or phoned the Ubi Soft hotline and asked for help. Most RPGs these days lead you quite gently into the adventure, letting you gain experience and knowledge as you find your way around; *Koshan* desperately needs a similar kind of approach. It also, by the way, needs a manual with less self-congratulation on the part of the designers, and much more explanation for the player.

All that said, it's time to turn to the positive, because many aspects of *Koshan* are outstanding. Any RPG in which you can converse in depth with a number of characters, which lets you pilot five different vehicles and aircraft (all through simplified flight simulators), which presents you with three challenging arcade-type games to play, and which allows you to engage in computer programming that actually works can only be called rich and complex. Add to this the fact that *Koshan* requires you to engage in realistic espionage activities such as subterfuge, detection, and downright theft, and you have a well-conceived game that, if you're willing to work, will reward you for the hours and hours you've spent. This is an old-style RPG, difficult and time-consuming, and that's both its weakness and its strength.

**Any RPG which lets you converse in depth with a number of characters, pilot five different vehicles and aircraft, play three challenging arcade-type games, and try your hand at computer programming can only be called rich and complex.**

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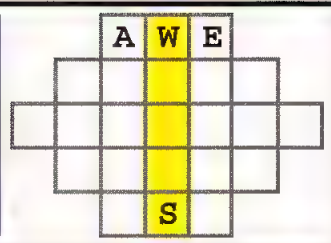
**Mystery Word Grid**




**WORD LIST**

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
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| ASK | TABLE | FIT | GAMES | THE |
| NEBULAR | RUNNING | CAPTAIN | TRILOGY | CARRIER |
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# THE DESKTOP GENERAL

## *PATRIOT: 360 RE-INVENTS THE WHEEL*

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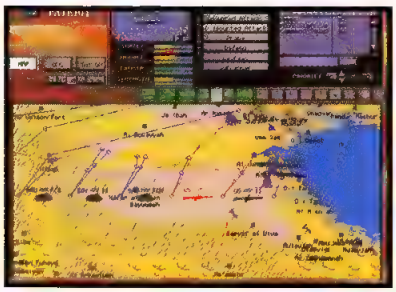
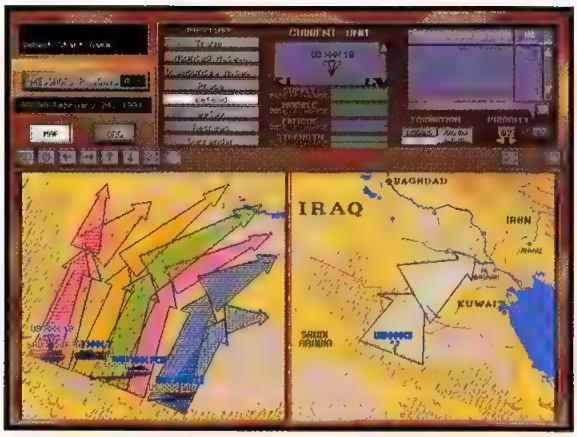


The first time I got a look at *Patriot*, **Three-Sixty**'s new and radically unconventional simulation of the Gulf War, was about two years ago at a CES. All that was on display was a mock-up of one screen, but its strange appearance sparked much curiosity. A land-based warfare game based on the *Harpoon* system? A war game devoid of hex grids, visible or otherwise? Units displayed by means of little tank icons, totally unencumbered with movement points, attack values, or any of the other quantifiers familiar to two generations of war-gamers? What brave new world of gaming did this portend?

Well, *Patriot* is finally out, and you certainly can't accuse it of being just another "same game, new war" product. Both graphics and interface are quite as revolutionary as Three-Sixty promised they would be. The entire design concept, in fact, is so different as to be disorienting. Thousands of man-hours of research have gone into its immense data base, and every convention of board and electronic war-gaming has either been stood on its head or tossed out completely.

Much as I would like to welcome it as an epoch-making breakthrough in game design, my response to *Patriot* is that much ado has been made about very little. Gamers with a low frustration-index should shun this product. As readers of this column have doubtless grasped by now, I'm not very much of a techie. My background is literary and history-oriented, and like most laymen I tend to feel mightily put-upon when box copy tells me about a "point-and-click interface so simple even a novice can play" and I end up spending three aggravating days swimming in a sea of obfuscation. I want to install the game, read the instructions *once*, and start playing, however ineptly, with *some* degree of pleasure, until the learning-curve kicks in and I begin to imbibe the subtler elements as a matter of course.

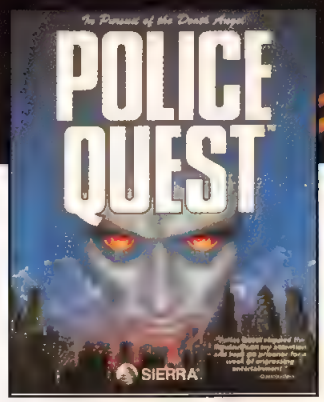



Hardcore war-gamers may sniff at this attitude, but I suspect that in the real-world marketplace there are more of "Us" than there are of "Them." And for PC gaming to achieve the wider audience it unquestionably deserves, more attention must be paid to making complex simulations understandable and gratifying to play *from the start*, at however crude a level that may temporarily be.

*Patriot*, with its hermetic, arcane design of powerful surface elegance and great conceptual vigor, is intellectually impressive — but as emotionally inspiring as a sack full of hammers. In short, it's precisely the kind of product that frightens newcomers away from computer gaming.

Both the Quick Start and more detailed Training Manual are written in opaque, bureaucratic prose, language as graceless and dispirited as that found in the average Pentagon procurement study. Page after eye-glazing page contains information about the interface ("invoking toggle switches," "unit priorities" and similar jargon), but almost nothing about *how to play the game*. There are no illustrations or diagrams, even where they are desperately needed; the paragraphs describing air support procedures, for example, bear only a faint re-

# "Officer Needs Assistance..."

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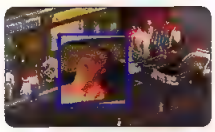

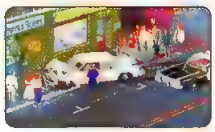

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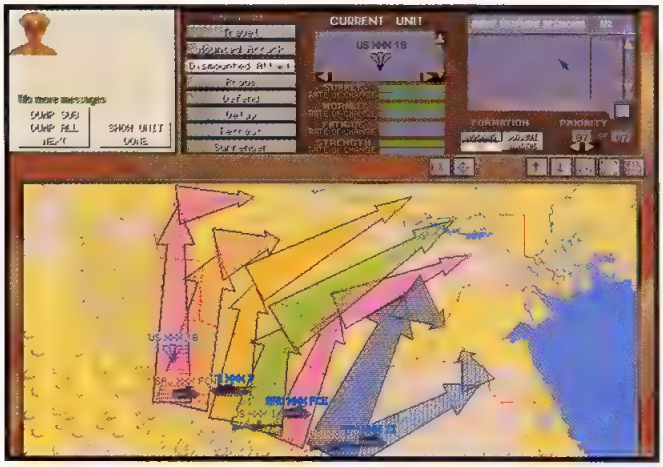
Product Information Number 109

semblance to what actually appears on the screen. Am I just stupid, or is this a design flaw? One thing's for sure: I resent any game that even poses that question.

Yes, I'll grant you that the polygon-rendered maps are amazingly accurate, but the operational scale of the game is so big that terrain is almost incidental to actual game-play. There's no doubt that somewhere in the bowels of the data base, every little *wadi* and sand dune is taken into account, but all this painstaking detail doesn't result in a noticeable increase in pleasure or drama for the player.

The SVGA graphics, I'm sorry to say, are a true mess. If you zoom out to the single-map view (I was never able to derive any useful information from the split-screen mode), the Iraqi army dwindles into an incredible briar patch of pixels — fragments of letters, numbers, Roman numerals, and tank icons snarled into a great fuzzy ball. Unit movement is displayed by means of fat, distended, overlapping arrows that merely serve to obscure the action. Combat results are displayed with pea-green letters on a white background, rendering the tiny text almost unreadable.




The worst sin this or any other war game can commit, however, is to let the battles themselves become boring. After I set the Tutorial battle in motion by carefully following every word of the manual, virtually *nothing* happened. The little tank icons crawled slowly across the desert, the bilious green-on-white combat reports came in, and the little numbers indicating enemy losses began to change.

**For PC gaming to achieve the wider audience it unquestionably deserves, more attention must be paid to making complex simulations understandable and gratifying to play from the very start.**

My friends, any war game that makes you work as hard to gain admission as *Patriot* does has an obligation to supply some first-class bang-bang, but here again the game disappoints — there is no graphic representation of battle whatsoever. The icons move, the numbers change, and eventually a screen pops up telling you that the Coalition has won and the Iraqis have lost. And that's *it*.

Let's face it. Life is too short and there are too many games out there that are equally as clever as *Patriot* strains to be, but which deliver the goods in terms of entertainment and/or enlightenment. On top of it all, the hardware requirements are somewhat steep when compared to most war games: a 386SX or better with SVGA and 4 megs of RAM.

By working so hard to create a "new" kind of war game, Three-Sixty has, however inadvertently, eliminated all the things that made the old kind so addictive. The real irony is that Three-Sixty also published the *V for Victory* system, which is wonderfully lucid, playable, and historically convincing.

Three-Sixty apparently realized that in its current incarnation *Patriot* falls far short of the expectations that were raised by previews given over the course of three Consumer Electronics Shows. A manual addendum states that Three-Sixty received many "great" suggestions for enhancements from its product testers, and that these will be incorporated into a new version of *Patriot*; owners of the original release will receive the upgrade at no charge when it becomes available. While it's commendable that Three-Sixty is ready to support its product so strongly, you have to wonder what harm there would have been in delaying an already long overdue product in order to incorporate those refinements.

I will return to *Utah Beach* and *Velikiye Luki* often. Not even the threat of torture could get me to play *Patriot* again. I am perfectly willing to admit that there may be wondrous layers of white-knuckled action and graphic excellence in *Patriot* that I am too impatient or too obtuse to have reached; for those of you who have the time, the patience, and the perseverance to search for them, more power to you.

GP

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# MORE BANGS, BOOMS, BASHES, BUMPS, BLASTS, AND BAMS FOR THE BUCK.

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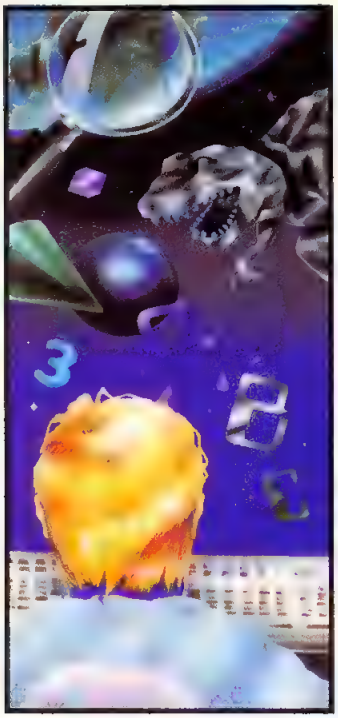

# THE LEARNING GAME

## NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

**LESLIE EISER**

*Scooter's Magic Castle*

"Edutainment" is plenty more than just a hot new buzzword. Today's edutainment titles are breaking new ground, as publishers combine leading-edge game technology with sound educational objectives. The best edutainment products can help your kids learn everything from reading to math, from geography to science. And they teach almost transparently, with game play that really does make learning a fun experience.

*Scooter's Magic Castle*

The first three releases from EA*Kids, a brand new product line from **Electronic Arts**, are perfect examples of the potential of edutainment. The initial offerings in the new lineup are distinctive, creative, imaginative, and exciting. They incorporate lots of great ideas — some definitely borrowed, but plenty that are fresh and original.

Even the EA*Kids installation program is fun. Youngsters will enjoy watching a popcorn box fill up as the program is installed, and the opening menu is appropriately easy to use: Not only does it provide access to all EA*Kids programs on your hard drive, but also includes self-running previews of upcoming attractions. It's heavy-handed marketing, but appealing nonetheless.

To grab and keep the attention of the youngest users in your house, there's *Ping and Kooky's Cuckoo Zoo* for kids from 3 to 6. You and your friendly travel-guide, Ping the Panda, ride an animated train through tunnels, under a waterfall, and across bridges. Your view from the train changes as you pass through 4 different ecosystems — first there's the Savannah with its distinctive grasslands, then a lush green jungle, a North American farm, and finally a polar region with ice and snow. At any point along the way, you can stop the train and hop off.

In each ecosystem, there are three games to play, each of which has three different levels of difficulty. The first and second games are the same at each stop. Depending on which level of difficulty you've selected, you point and click on one of the animals (between five and eight) in that ecosystem to learn its name, play a picture matching game, or use audio clues to match the image of an animal with its name. Click on Kooky Cuckoo, Ping the Panda's companion who shows up whenever you explore an environment, to play the second game. Kooky will mix up the heads, tails, bodies, and colors of the animals, and it's the child's job to correct the mistakes.

The third game changes from location to location. Visit the polar region to practice some simple counting skills with the walrus, travel to the farm for a game of hide-and-seek, play an alphabet game in the jungle, or color the animals on the Savannah. A fifth area, the Wacky Zoo Revue, features animals that sing and dance under the creative direction of children.

*Cuckoo Zoo* combines excellent graphics, some lighthearted animation (well-suited to the target audience), decent sound effects, a parent handbook with suggestions for non-computer activities, and an adorable interface. It's a good

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The streamlined interface with the new ALL ATTACK button gives you the smoother moves you'll need to survive in combat.

Eye III is an assault on your senses, with three times more cinematic intermissions and five fully-scored music pieces. Plus the ability to import your favorite characters from Eye II, along with weapons, treasure and experience levels.

The way the developers of Eye III see it, if you're going to go out, you might as well go out in style. Who knows, 40-100 hours later, you might just see the light at the end of Eye III. Then again, you might not.

SSI

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introduction to the computer for young kids, and a title they'll return to again and again.

*Scooter's Magic Castle* (with 17 different learning games for kids from 5 to 8) is, in my opinion, the best of the three initial offerings from EA*Kids. Hidden in the rooms, hallways, and attics of Scooter's castle are secret passages, trap doors, a ghost, a wizard, and a collection of games to discover. *Scooter's Magic Castle* excels both as a point-and-click exploration and as a learning adventure. Each of the games focuses on a unique early learning activity, from pattern recognition to keyboarding and coloring.

The pattern recognition activity is hidden in the Wizard's Chamber. A friendly ghost has mixed up the Wizard's belongings, and it's up to you to match each object with its shadow.

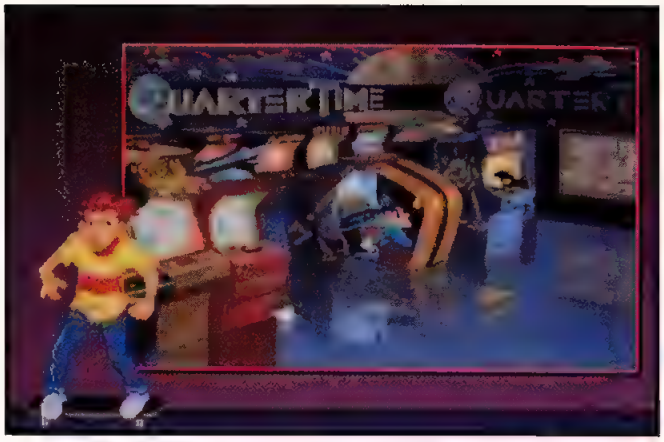
Another cute game that hones pattern-matching skills is the Magic FaceMaker. You can design a disguise for Scooter, or test your memory skills by playing Mug Shot, in which you get a quick look at a weird face, then try to remember exactly which of the dozen or so possible features are the ones you saw. Sounds easy, but it's not!

I particularly liked exploring the laboratory on the second floor of the castle. You get an animated reward for correctly mixing primary-colored paints and coloring Scooterstein. And if you'd rather, you can forgo the reward and just mix colors to your heart's content. Don't forget to try out the X-ray machine, the stethoscope, and the magnifying glass. Each behaves as you might imagine — although you might not always see and hear what you'd expect.

The whole program is filled with whimsical touches, such as brooms that change into fishing rods and some very surprising mirrors. Like *Cuckoo Zoo*, *Scooter's Magic Castle* includes a guide for parents, packed with computer-independent games and activities. It's hard to go wrong with a program that offers so many opportunities for play and learning.

Completely different but just as creative, *Eagle Eye Mysteries* is a game for good readers from 8 to 14. Perhaps because it's targeted at older players, this product places obvious emphasis on learning. There's little question that you're honing your reading skills as you help Jake and Jennifer Eagle solve over 60 different mysteries.

**The initial offerings in the EA*Kids lineup are distinctive, creative, imaginative, and exciting. They incorporate lots of great ideas — some definitely borrowed, but plenty that are fresh and original.**



*Eagle Eye Mysteries*

As you and one of these teenage supersleuths explore the town of Richview, you'll interview suspects, gather clues (handily recorded in the EDISON — Eagle Detective's Input Screen and On-line Notebook), and eventually solve the crime by picking the five or so clues that best support your suspicion. The real challenge in the game is in picking out the correct clues. Just knowing who done it isn't enough; you have to be able to demonstrate *why* you're sure.

*Ping and Kooky's Cuckoo Zoo*

Each casebook has a variety of crimes kids can attempt to solve. Some involve jewel thieves, others concern art objects, and still others cover more everyday problems like missing skateboards and lost homework. Rather neatly, your interviews of witnesses are designed to be informative, as well as sources of clues. In the Case of the Missing Buddha, for instance, a visit to the library reveals a motive for the robbery, as well as an explanation of what statues of Buddha look like and their religious significance.

Perhaps the most exciting thing about the EA*Kids line is the potential that Electronic Arts brings to educational computing. As a leading game developer, Electronic Arts *knows* what makes a title exciting, stimulating, and entertaining. Add to these skills the contributions of an impressive lineup of educators, and the EA*Kids line could well become one of the major forces in the blossoming edutainment field.

GP

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Product Information Number 105

# X-WING

**LEE BUCHANAN**

**Category:** Space-Combat Simulation
**Publisher:** LucasArts

**Developer:** LucasArts

**Rating:**

Move over, *Wing Commander*. After a few years of ruling the galaxies virtually unchallenged, that classic finally has a worthy challenger. Authors Lawrence Holland and Edward Kilham have put together a top-notch game that's brave enough to call itself a Star Wars simulation — and good enough to pull it off, with room to spare.

*X-Wing*, the long-awaited space-combat simulator from LucasArts, is loaded with stunning graphics, stirring sound, and a superior plot drawn directly from the Star Wars movie saga.

The story is wonderfully familiar to any fan of the Star Wars movies. *X-Wing* puts you in Luke Skywalker's shoes, to do battle against the evil Empire. The sights and sounds of the movies are spectacularly recreated here, from the scream of Imperial fighters to the heavy breathing of Darth Vadar.

But gorgeous graphics and stunning sound don't necessarily make a great computer game, as we saw with the release of *Mantis*, a recent aspirant to *Wing Commander*'s throne. But where *Mantis* promised the moon and stars and fell flat, *X-Wing* delivers a game that's beautiful, easy to learn, and constantly challenging. Designer Holland's past credits include *Their Finest Hour* and *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe*, and the many strengths of those fine simulations are very much in

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evidence here.

According to the box — and after scores of hours of play I have no reason to doubt it — the campaign takes place in an authentic Star Wars galaxy, and what a beautiful world it is. From the cinematic sequences to the actual game-play images, the graphics are as good as any you'll see. If you usually watch the animated sequences of a new game once or twice and then skip them forever, *X-Wing* may break you of that habit; the transitional scenes are so beautifully rendered that they're a joy to watch again and again. The game has a true 3-D look as you shuttle back and forth between the flagship and the rebel training facility, while the bitmapped images of the crews working on your starfighters have surprising depth.

Fans of the movies will appreciate the appearance of several Star Wars characters in some of the sequences: If you're unfortunate enough to be captured by the Alliance, for example, you'll meet Darth Vadar, and the ever-faithful R2D2 is always along for the ride, providing those reassuring chirps while repairing damage to your ship.

OK, so you've seen great cinematic sequences before, only to be disappointed when you get to the meat of the game and find only ho-hum graphics. But *X-Wing* is one of those rare games that fulfills the promise of those sexy introductory scenes. Spacecraft are sharp and textured, even at very close range. Other objects in the Star Wars universe — planets, galaxies, and nebulae — are all handsomely rendered. The bitmap explosions are particularly well-done, with spacecraft erupting in a ball of fire before disintegrating into so much space debris.

The sound effects are nothing short of outstanding. The roar of other spacecraft, the jolts of lasers, and the launching of missiles all add drama to the experience. True, you really couldn't hear any of these things in space, but utter silence might be a bit *too* realistic. There's also a smattering of speech, including messages from your wingmen.

The musical score, based on the original movie soundtrack, is pleasant without becoming intrusive. If you're accustomed to turning the music off in games, you might find yourself enjoying it here a little longer than usual.

The game begins aboard the rebel flagship *Independence*, where you must acquire the

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skills to defeat the hordes of Alliance spacecraft. The first stop for all rookies should be the Pilot Proving Ground, a series of obstacle courses where novices learn how to fly, fight, and survive. Gamers eager to jump into the thick of things may choose to pass up these practice missions, but they're an excellent way to get into the game.

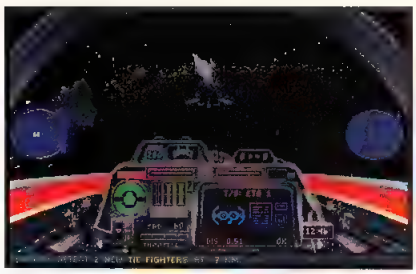
After you earn your wings, it's off to the Historical Missions, simulations that offer varying degrees of difficulty and complexity. Here you can familiarize yourself with the

strengths and weaknesses of the Alliance's three starfighters — the X-Wing, A-Wing, and Y-Wing. You usually fly the X-Wing, but the other spacecraft are better suited to some roles.

But to earn hero status you'll need to sign on for a Tour of Duty. Though the three tours can be played in any order, the best way to get a true feel for the campaign is to play them in chronological order.

As all PC space-combat vets have come to expect, you'll use hyperspace travel to get to the mission objective. Once there, you can access the excellent targeting system to identify the objectives and most dangerous threats. Weapons vary slightly from ship to ship, but all the craft have laser cannons. Other weapons include proton torpedoes, concussion missiles, and ion cannons.

The most common opponent is the TIE fighter, a familiar sight to anyone who's seen *Star Wars*. Destroying them doesn't take a lot of firepower, but just landing a shot is tough — these babies are incredibly maneuverable. Other craft — interceptors, bombers, shuttles, transports, assault gunboats, freighters, tugs, and the mighty star destroyer — are more formidable, and you'll need to use different tactics against each in order to emerge victorious.



You'll often encounter a challenging mix of enemy spacecraft on a single mission. You might be ordered to destroy a fleet of freighters and their TIE fighter escorts, for example, and five minutes into the fray a star destroyer shows up to spoil the fun.

Cockpit instrumentation is attractive and detailed, and laid out in a manner that makes accessing vital information a breeze. You can change the distribution of power among shields, weapons, and engines, offering a degree of control that makes *X-Wing* the thinking person's shoot-'em-up game. The flexibility this option provides gives the game a strategic depth never before seen in space-combat sims: Lose your shields, and you can divert power to them by shutting down the laser cannons; if you need an especially powerful laser blast to disable a larger opponent, do you dare bring the shields down long enough to get off a shot? The realism and versatility of the spacecraft aren't achieved at the expense of simplicity, however; a joystick and a few keystrokes are all you need to jump right in and start blasting Empire starfighters.

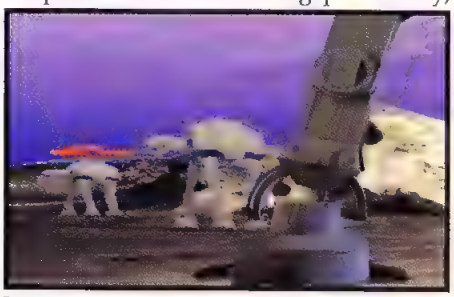
Missions are wonderfully varied. There are plenty of hair-raising space-dogfights — in true Star Wars fashion, you're usually outnumbered about three to one in these — but you'll also be assigned reconnaissance and escort missions. And if you can survive, you'll take part in the attack on the Empire's Death Star, flying into the trench just like those guys in the movies.

Perfection is hard to achieve in any game, however, and *X-Wing* is no exception. In the Tours of Duty, the player is required to complete each mission before moving on to the next one, and survival alone isn't enough: if you didn't complete the objectives you have to do it again. That's not realistic, and it can be downright maddening when you get to some of the more difficult missions. It's an unnecessary frustration in an otherwise excellent game.

*X-Wing* offers all the stuff you expect from a good air-combat simulation — 17 external and internal cockpit views, replay, promotions, decorations, and pilots whose skills improve with experience.

Documentation is straightforward and brief — there just isn't that much needed to learn, play, and enjoy the game. There's also quite a bit of background material detailing the history of the struggle between the Empire and the Alliance.

Despite the undeniable popularity of this category of computer gaming, there's been a curious lack of quality space-combat simulations. The gap between *Wing Commander* and almost every other similar game has been enormous. But *X-Wing* has closed that gap in a hurry,



and perhaps even edged ahead of its venerable rival.

The minimum hardware requirements are high, but not uncommon: a 386 CPU or better, a meg of RAM, VGA, and a mouse or joystick. But this is one of those game that justifies making that upgrade you've been considering. Beautiful, detailed, thrilling, and immensely enjoyable, *X-Wing* is a jewel that shouldn't be missed.

GP

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Product Information Number 221

# SPACE QUEST V: ROGER WILCO IN THE NEXT MUTATION

**GARY MEREDITH**

**Category:** Graphic Adventure

**Publisher:** Sierra

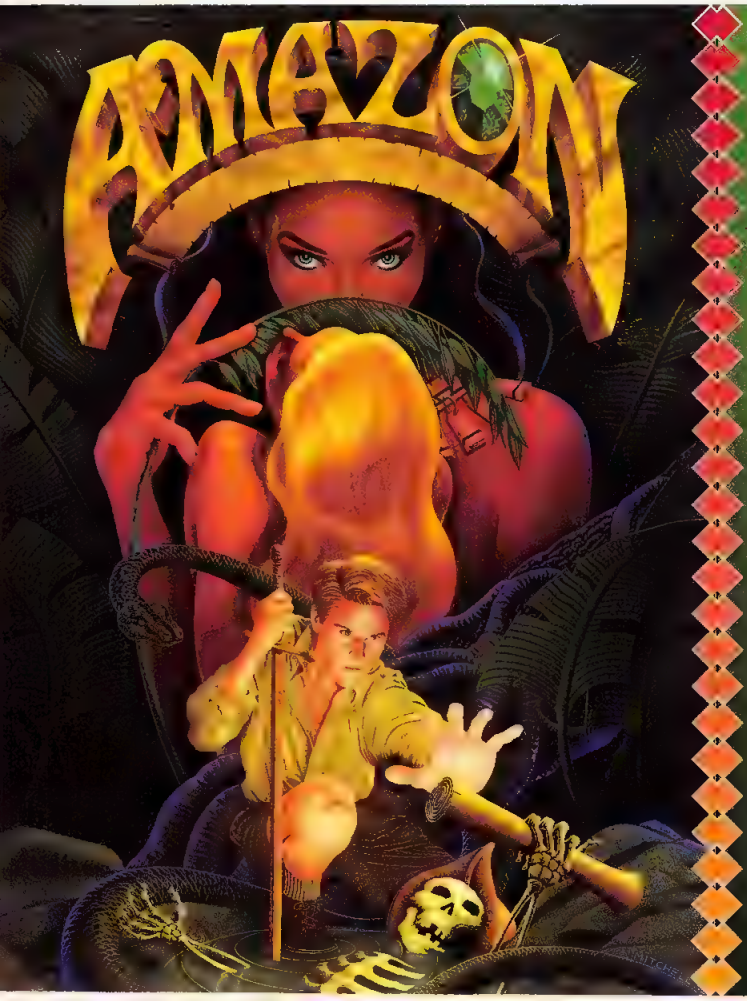
**Developer:** Sierra

**Rating:**

If you could get your hands on a copy of Webster's 357th New Collegiate Dictionary (copyright 3011 A.D.) and look up the definition of "hero," you'd probably find a picture of Roger Wilco. Unfortunately, you'd probably also find his countenance under the entries for "goof," "dork," and "befuddled." Those terms don't usually come to mind when you think of valiant deeds, but our Roger somehow seems to make it all work — he's stumbled through so many adventures now that it's almost a given he'll make it through the next one.

At least that was true until Roger crossed the path of Raems T. Quirk, pompous starship captain and owner of the worst toupeé in seven galaxies. Just as Roger was about to graduate from Starcon Academy with honors — well, as honorable as you can be after cheating on the final exam — he managed to take Quirk down a few notches in the eyes of a beautiful and very familiar-looking ambassador. That explains why he's saddled with the worst ship and the worst crew in the fleet, on a mission to rid the universe of its refuse. Yes, Roger Wilco, hero to billions, savior of worlds, defender of truth and justice, is right back where he started so long ago — driver of a cosmic garbage truck.

*Space Quest V: Roger Wilco*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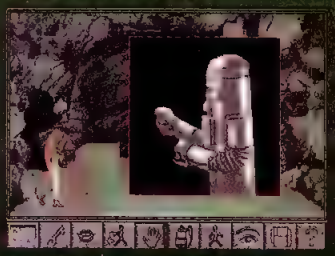
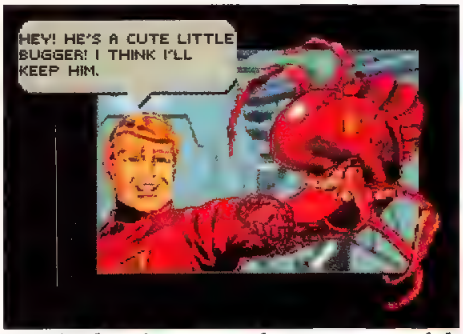


Metal monsters seek your destruction!*

*in the Next Mutation*, picks up where its predecessor, *Space Quest IV: Roger Wilco and the Time Rippers*, left off. Thanks to the convolutions of time travel in *SQIV*, Roger met his son, and saw a vision of the woman who would someday be his wife. It's not much of a surprise that Beatrice, the Federation Ambassador, is the spitting image of his future wife, but it does tax the imagination to figure out how a garbage-scow jockey like Roger is going to fulfill his conjugal destiny.

Roger's mission is to journey to distant galaxies and pick up the trash that's been left orbiting planets in giant plastic "Husky" bags. But as is his usual custom, he manages to




get mixed up in a zany adventure, this time involving genetic experimentation for profit. And for some reason he's being tailed by a *Terminator*-like robot known as W-D40. She's out to make Roger pay for a transgression committed in one of the previous Space Quest adventures, and nothing will stop her —nothing, that is, but some fast thinking by Roger involving native fauna on the planet Kiz Urazgubi.

With a rebuilt W-D40 now as one of the dumpster *Eureka*'s crew, Roger bumbles into an even bigger mess when the crew of the *Goliath*, captained by his nemesis Raems T. Quirk, becomes infected with a rather nasty genetic experiment concocted by the Genetix Corporation. Hunting down the *Goliath* and finding a way to overcome the genetically altered crew becomes the Prime Directive.

Along the way, you'll be treated to a smorgasbord of science-fiction references from literature, movies, and television: You'll find everything from "Star Trek" (both TV shows and all the movies) to *2001* to the *Alien* films to "Doctor Who" to "The Jetsons," with a little Asimov, Clarke, Niven, and Adams thrown in for good measure. You may get so involved in placing specific references, in fact, that you forget to play the game. That would indeed be a shame, for like the previous entries in the Space Quest series, *Space Quest V* is, above all, an engrossing adventure. It's a rare game in which you can be so puzzled, so bewildered, and so aggravated, yet still enjoy yourself. As usual with all Sierra games, you're

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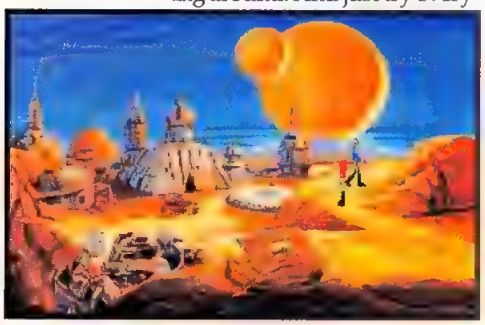
Product Information Number 101

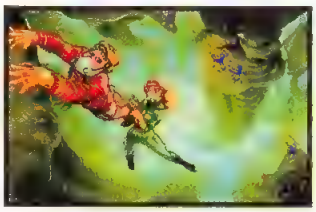
SPACE QUEST 5: THE NEXT MUTATION
SCORE: 480
AHA! THERE YOU ARE! SEE IF YOU CAN OUTRUN MY ENERGY BOLTS OF DEATH, BROOM JOCKEY.
W-D40

called upon to solve problems by looking at things with a convoluted, inverted, inside-out point of view.

Your best strategy when entering a scene — after you've saved your game, of course — is to use the Look icon to look at *everything*. This takes a little patience, since you must usually have to place the icon directly on an object to uncover any information. Beyond looking, use the Walk and Action icons to explore. There are many instances, such as on the planet Klorox II or the Genetix secret laboratory, where there are additional, important scenes that you aren't aware of just by looking around. And just try everything, no matter how silly or illogical. It might not make *logical* sense to adopt a vile, acid-dripping, face-hugging mutant for a pet, but you'll be glad you did when you have to spring the ship's engineer from the brig in a scene right out of "The Trouble with Tribbles."



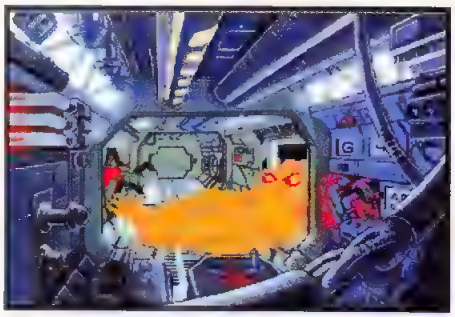
If you played *Space Quest IV: Roger Wilco and the Time Rippers*, you'll notice a decidedly different tone in this new series entry. For one thing, it's somewhat less raunchy than the last game. There are a number of scenes, such as those with W-D40 or the bantering with Flo on board the Eureka, that would have been played to the hilt in *Space Quest IV*, but are only mildly suggestive here. To be sure, W-D40 blazing away with her superstructure in one of the final scenes is none too subtle, but it's a far cry from the dominatrix with the razor in *Space Quest IV*.



*Space Quest V* seems a bit more linear in comparison to the earlier games, and the graphics have changed subtly. This is understandable, since only half the design team — The Two Guys from Andromeda — remains. Mark Crowe has made *Space Quest V* his own, and his personality comes through much the way we see Roberta Williams (King's Quest) or Al Lowe (Leisure Suit Larry) in their series. The graphics have a somewhat muted look that closely resembles those of Sierra's subsidiary, Dynamix, while retaining the comic-book appearance of the other Space Quest games. (There's actually an EGA version of this game, something of a rarity these days.) Sound board owners will enjoy a good soundtrack that's synchronized nicely with the onscreen action, and some digitized speech is tossed in to boot.

Sierra's icon-based interface remains one of the fastest, most logical around, especially when used with a mouse. You can easily access all commands, either by the overhead menu bar, or by clicking through the main commands with the right mouse button. Inventory items are a breeze to pick and use and, as always, saving, restoring, and configuration routines are simple. This is high praise indeed from someone who once thought the text-based interface was the pinnacle of adventure gaming.

*Space Quest V: Roger Wilco in the Next Mutation* is a must with a capital M for any graphic adventure fan, especially for those who have so loyally followed Roger Wilco's adventures. The plot has enough twists to challenge those who have boldly gone before, while still providing a fairly reasonable entree for newcomers to upper-level graphic adventuring. This one should keep Roger Wilco in the future's history books — and dictionaries — for millennia to come. The folks back in Andromeda can surely hold their snouts high now.



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# CAESAR™

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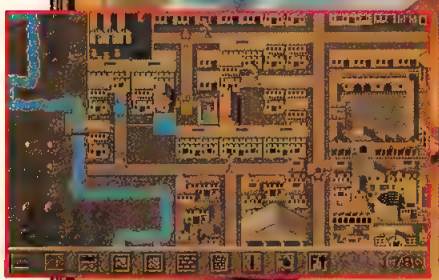

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## Impressions

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Product Information Number 180

# TASK FORCE 1942

WILLIAM R. TROTTER

**Category:** Strategy

**Publisher:** MicroProse

**Developer:** MicroProse

**Rating:**

"You saw the Jap ships first by the starshells — they looked tiny and white under the sputtering light. Then they lit up from the flash of their own broadsides. When the eight-inch shells from their cruisers started landing, they threw up enormous mountains of water, and the light from the other shells and gunfire colored them orange and red — we

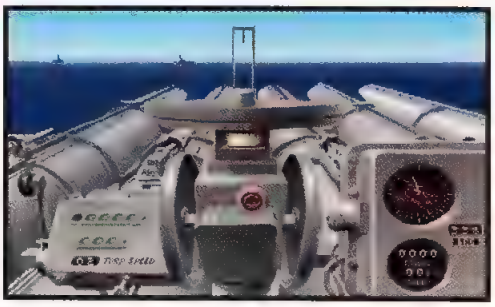
learned to take cover from those near-misses, because each one of those big beautiful waterspouts was full of shrapnel...later on, I got a good view of one of their cruisers — the *Sendai* — going down, she was on fire from one end to the other and part of her hull was glowing cherry red. You had to feel sorry for the men on board...but not too sorry, because if we hadn't gotten the drop on them, it might have been our ship instead."

I tape-recorded those words in the spring of 1988, in an interview with an old sailor named Leroy Nicolson who only had a few months to live and who had enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1942, at age sixteen. He was describing a night battle between an American task force of cruisers and destroyers and a more powerful Japanese task force that, on this occasion, found itself out-maneuvered in the waters off Bougainville. Mr. Nicolson might have been a tad fuzzy in his recollections of what he had done a week ago, but the passage of forty-five years had done nothing to dim the memory of that night battle.

While playing through the campaign game in Microprose's sensational new naval simulation *Task Force 1942*, I had many occasions to remember Leroy's description of the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay. After all, mostof the engagements off Guadalcanal took place at night, when both sides' air power was moot and when the Japanese enjoyed a significant advantage in night-vision optics that more than compensated for the Americans' crude and often poorly understood radar systems. And Microprose has used every trick in the book of computer graphics *not* to simply pile sexy effect onto sexy effect or glitz up an otherwise fairly sedate sort of war game, but to recreate, with often breath-taking verisimilitude, the look and feel of a nighttime battle in the deadly waters of Iron Bottom Sound.

Before you fling yourself into this simulation, it's worth your while to set up an engagement, turn command over to your computerized admiral, then switch to the Observer's View of the unfolding battle. It's all here, just as seaman Nicolson saw it from his 40mm guntub aboard the *USS Montpelier*: drifting starshells, the enemy fleet observed in strobe-light fashion from the light of its own broadsides, the freight-train arc of heavy-caliber tracers, the veritable garden-hose streams of lighter caliber fire, the chillingly beautiful eruptions of waterspouts, the blossom of fire and the lurch of ruptured steel when an enemy shell strikes home.

In the night-battle scenes of *TF 1942*, Microprose has set a new touchstone for the personal war movie. It's like watching all the best footage from *Victory at Sea*, only in color, with crunchingly effective sound effects and the ability to step into the fray, *on any ship you want*, and actually take over firing the guns or launching the torpedoes.



Players may take command on three levels: the entire task force, a division of same-class ships within the task force, or an individual ship. Most players will probably want to mix and match — playing Admiral when the opposing fleets are jockeying for position, then demoting oneself to Gunners Mate for the shootouts. Since naval engagements tend to be confused, vision-driven affairs, most naval tactics are pretty simple matters of setting a heading, ordering a column-turn or some other basic maneuver, and

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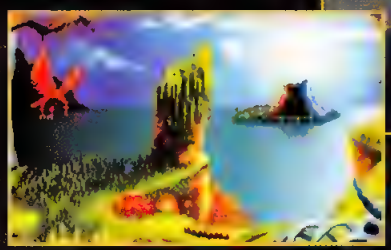

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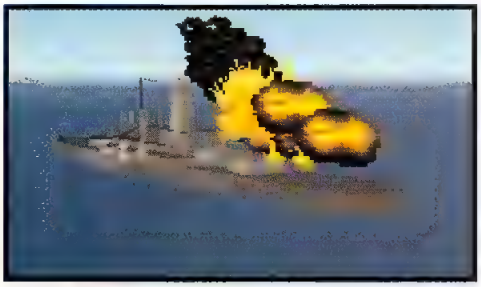
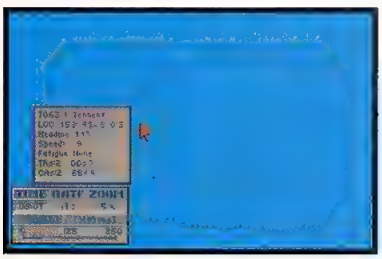
Product Information Number 109

trying to get your broadsides in the air first (and hopefully more accurately than the enemy's). The *TF 1942* interface reflects this simplicity, and its actions are well-explained in the handsome documentation.

The greatest challenge is the Campaign scenario, which covers all five months of the epic struggle for Guadalcanal, a period that saw the U.S. Navy engage in more pitched surface battles than in all its other wars combined. The

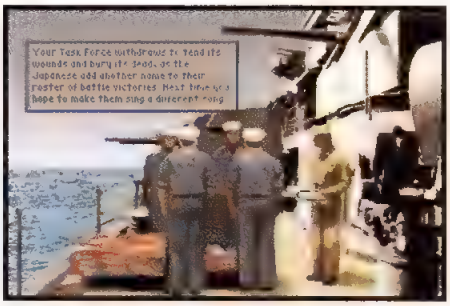


Americans begin the campaign at a disadvantage: their nighttime optics and training are markedly inferior to the Japanese and their torpedoes (at least on the game's Realistic setting) have neither the range nor the power of the dreaded Japanese "Long Lance" missiles. As more and better ships trickle in from the States, the odds become more even. There's a real gamer's rush when a brand new North Carolina-class battleship first comes under your command.



The Campaign games are strangely varied. If you're lucky enough to sneak a major supply convoy through to Henderson Field on a night when the Japanese aren't at sea, you can win in a matter of weeks. Usually, though, the campaign matches its historical counterpart and turns into a brutal war of attrition.

Historical battles cover individual engagements in the Guadalcanal period and are mostly wild, nocturnal melees where victory goes to the side that gets in the first hits and keeps scoring.



Simple mouse-clicks or keystrokes let you jump among the various battle stations, to the bridge, to the charts (to change heading, speed, or formation), or to damage control. Only in one aspect could this interface be improved: When you jump from the Gun Director station (where you do all your shooting) to any other viewpoint, the game doesn't put you back at the gun director's station with the same firing solution you had acquired before you left. You must waste precious time finding the correct range all over again, and you can easily sustain lethal damage in the process.

Also irritating is the fact that though the gun director will lock on and track whichever enemy ship is centered in its sights when you access that station, that ship may *not* be the one you want to shoot at. If several enemy ships are in sight at one time, you may expend valuable time and shells trying to figure out exactly which target you have a firing solution on. Surely this problem would be easy to fix, making a superb simulation even better.

There's also an odd quirk early in the Historical scenarios: countless times, even though I had my spotting glasses aligned straight down the bearing of the enemy fleet, the enemy ships did not become visible until after they had begun firing. Perhaps this is meant to simulate the Japanese advantage in optics, but too often it means the Japanese get in all the first hits — and for some reason they have a dismaying ability to knock out one of your main gun turrets with their first salvo or two. Sometimes this peculiarity didn't affect the battle, while other times it didn't seem to happen at all; but it occurred more often than not, each time leaving me with a sense of unfairness.

As gripping as the campaign and single-battle actions are, the really *fun* element of the game lies in creating your own encounters with Custom Scenario mission builder. Effortless to use, this allows you to set up battles between virtually any surface warships in either fleet. The fantasy possibilities are endless, limited only by your imagination: gang up ten destroyers against the superbattleship *Yamato*; have two battlewagons slug it out in an artillery duel, pit two fleets of destroyers against each other (those five-inch batteries fire almost as fast as you can pull the trigger and the visual feedback when you smash a full broadside into an enemy ship is terrific!). If, for instance, you've just suffered a humiliating defeat, you can work out your frustrations by customizing a scenario that pits you, in a destroyer, against six wallowing enemy transportships.

You'll need 2 MB of RAM and DOS 5.0 to play *Task Force 1942*, as well as one of the supported sound boards to enjoy the dynamic sound effects. But those sort of requirements are becoming more and more frequent nowadays, and in this instance they're justified: *Task Force 1942* does for surface ships what *Silent Service II* did for submarines. Magnificent!

GP

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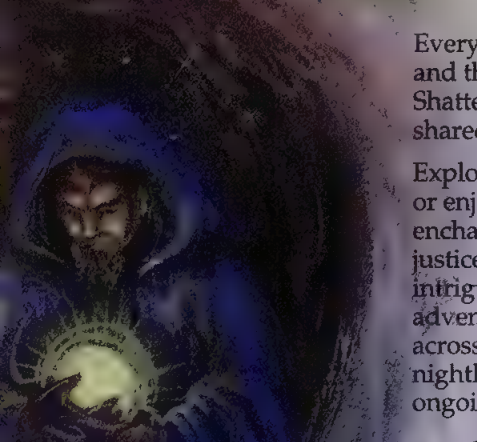

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Product Information Number 124

# ERIC THE UNREADY

**BERNIE YEE**

**Category:** Graphic Adventure

**Publisher:** Legend

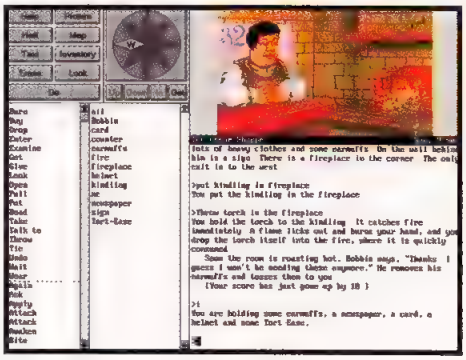
**Developer:** Legend

**Rating:**

Playing *Eric The Unready* is a little like going home. In this case, however, the "home" — which had its original foundations in a now-legendary empire called Zork and a company named Infocom — has been renovated by a masterful architect and interior designer, resulting in a completely overhauled design which still retains the spirit of the original.

I thrilled to *Zork* and other classic Infocom adventures long before the arrival of point-and-click graphical extravaganzas. The beauty of those text-only games was in the evocative descriptions used to vitalize the long-abandoned mazes that made up the Great Underground Empire. And with masterfully woven mysteries like *Deadline* and science-fiction romps like *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, it was easy to see why most of Infocom's releases were eagerly awaited. But when adventure games made a headlong dive toward graphics back in the heyday of the Apple II, text-based games began to look a little worn. And as lush, colorful, graphics became the rule of the day, it was clear that the days of the text adventure were at an end.

But the graphic adventure format clearly sacrificed the complexity of both narrative and puzzles in favor of good looks and maximum playability. Indeed, only now are graphic adventures incorporating the same level of depth of games like *Zork* — thanks in no small part to Bob Bates and some wise Infocom refugees, who founded Legend Entertainment to carry on the quest for literate adventuring.

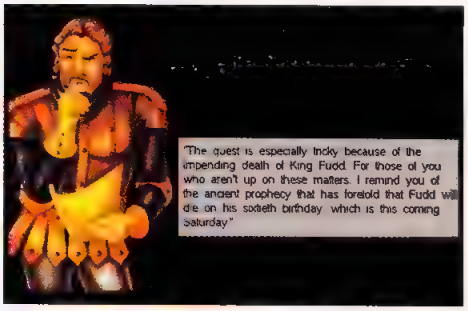


Like its famous ancestors (both *Zork* and Legend's Spellcasting series), *Eric the Unready* takes you into a medieval fantasy world which has more in common with *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* than Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The game chronicles the adventures of Eric, a most-unlikely hero who stumbles into success in much the same way you and I stumble into furniture in the dark.

*Eric The Unready* opens with a lighthearted mini-quest — Eric must lift the curse on a farmer's daughter who's been turned into a sow. Naturally, a kiss is in order to reverse the effects of the curse, but strangely enough the pig has other intentions, and scampers into an outhouse. After retrieving the pig from the privy (an unfortunate encounter which leaves Eric in less-than-fragrant form), Eric learns the hard way that there was no curse after all, and proceeds to incite the farmer's cows to stampede after the herd gets a whiff of him.

This little escapade is of no consequence to your main quest, but it's a great example of the excellent game design evident through *Eric* and other Legend titles: not only does this small puzzler acquaint newcomers to an unfamiliar interface and game system, but it also showcases some of Eric's considerable "talents." And it provides some immediate comic relief *and* positive reinforcement by letting a gamer successfully solve a fairly easy puzzle before jumping into the duck pond.

Eric's in no condition to meet royalty after the stampede, so of course the first person he encounters is none other than the king's beautiful daughter. When the princess gives him a lift in her private coach, in fact, she takes a fancy to Eric and his uncomplicated ways. But wouldn't you know it — just when it looks as though Eric's luck has changed, the princess is kidnapped and the king is prophesied to die. And of all the heroic knights who could be chosen to find the princess, bumbling Eric gets tagged for the job. As you ready yourself for your mission, you discover — with the help of a boozing, sports-watching wizard — that


"The quest is especially tricky because of the impending death of King Fudd. For those of you who aren't up on these matters, I remind you of the ancient prophecy that has foretold that Fudd will die on his sixtieth birthday which is this coming Saturday."

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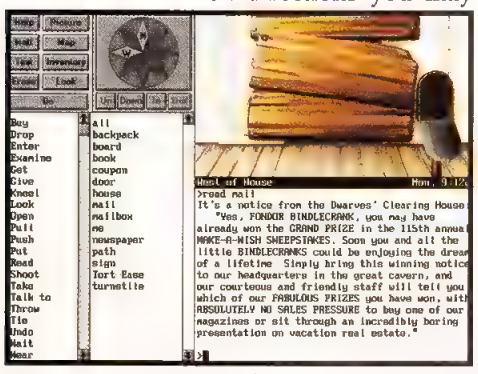
there's a conspiracy behind the princess's kidnapping, and that Eric has been handpicked to fail.

You're off to a wide variety of locales — including a nostalgic trip to the front door of the Great Underground Empire, complete with the actual text from the opening of *Zork I* — as you guide Eric on a race against time to rescue the princess before her father croaks. Once you leave an area you can't return, but then again you can't leave until you've solved the puzzle. There are all sorts of mini-games scattered throughout *Eric*, such as the Concentration-style card game where you compete against a carnival shyster. You need to win these games to continue adventuring, but thankfully none of them are particularly difficult.

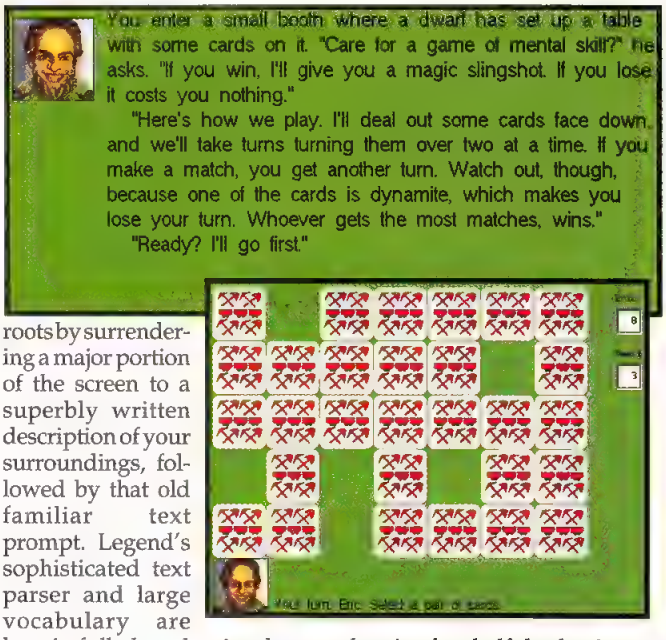
The silly and pointed humor of *Eric* creator Bob Bates is constantly evident throughout the game, as is Legend's excellent sense of plot pacing. *Eric* is loads of fun to play from start to finish, and makes a strong case for typing sentences rather than relying on the ubiquitous point-and-click simplicity of most other adventures. The plot is advanced by a number of animated cut scenes, and sound provides a subtle background enhancement to the game atmosphere.

The main game screen is an elegant mix of graphic images and textual descriptions. A compass rose indicates in which directions you may move, while roughly a third of the screen is used for a graphic showing Eric's surroundings. But while the pictures are quite pretty (though rather small in the 800x600x16 SVGA mode), Legend betrays its Infocom roots by surrendering a major portion of the screen to a superbly written description of your surroundings, followed by that old familiar text prompt. Legend's sophisticated text parser and large vocabulary are here in full glory, but in a bow to gamers weaned on simpler graphic adventures, a list of applicable verbs and nouns are provided for your reference.

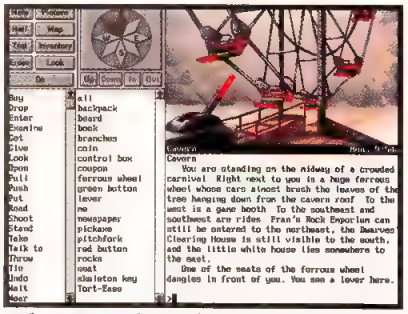



You can use your mouse to build a command by clicking on a series of words, graphic elements, or a combination of both. One way to tie the rope to the hook in the outhouse, for example, is to click on Tie in the verb list, then on Rope in the list of nouns, then on To (prepositions pop up when needed), and finally on the hook itself. This interface qualifies as point-and-click, but only barely, and typing is still the optional way to input commands. Since objects you can see in the graphic image *can't* be manipulated via the mouse, the word list comes in mighty handy (though grizzled adventurers will appreciate the option to toggle off the list).

Those in search of a flashback to simpler times can toggle off everything but the text description; the description tells you of all important objects lying around, so you know exactly what you can pick up or use. As in *Zork*, the only useless word in Eric's vocabulary is the word "help" — ask for it, and all you'll receive is a little scorn and sarcasm. Online help, as in the latest Access games, would be nice, but half the fun is typing in commands that lead to silly responses.


You enter a small booth where a dwarf has set up a table with some cards on it. "Care for a game of mental skill?" he asks. "If you win, I'll give you a magic slingshot. If you lose, it costs you nothing."
"Here's how we play. I'll deal out some cards face down, and we'll take turns turning them over two at a time. If you make a match, you get another turn. Watch out, though, because one of the cards is dynamite, which makes you lose your turn. Whoever gets the most matches, wins."
"Ready? I'll go first."
8
3
Your turn. Eric. Select a pair of cards.

Legend has earned a solid reputation for designing clever, challenging puzzles, and *Eric* is no exception. Nearly all of the puzzles are logically designed and downright funny, so there's no need to stumble around and flail for solutions. The clues you need are always there; you just need to be methodical in your deductions.




*Eric the Unready* is proof positive that a company can aim for the high road and still produce a game that appeals to the entire range of adventure gamer. If you haven't tried a Legend adventure before, here's a perfect opportunity — you'll find *Eric* a much more satisfying workout for your mind *and* your funny bone than its pretty competition.

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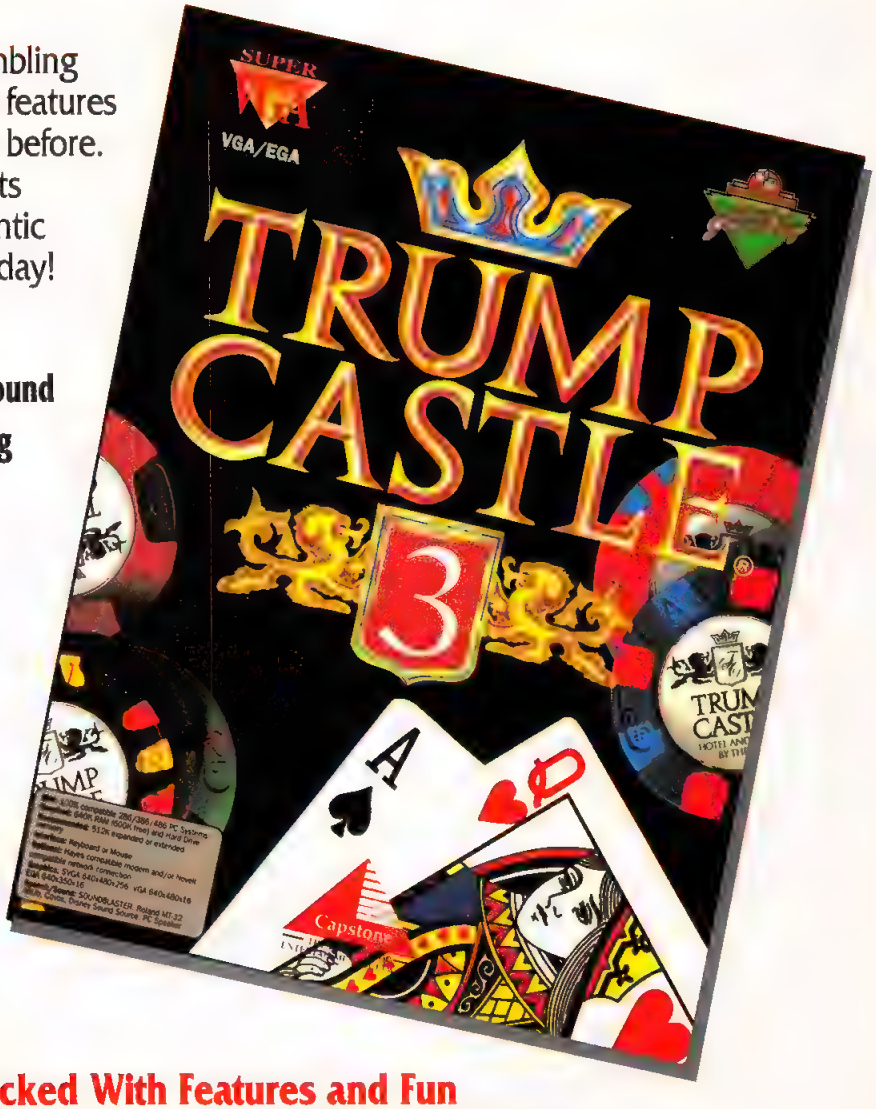


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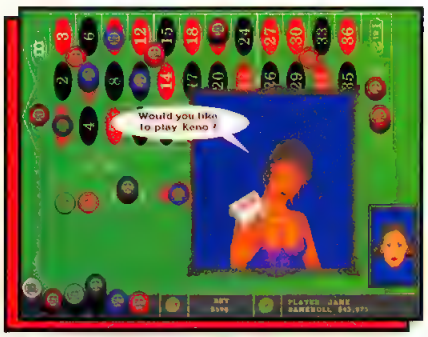

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# F-15 STRIKE EAGLE III

**T. LIAM McDONALD**

**Category:** Air-Combat Simulation

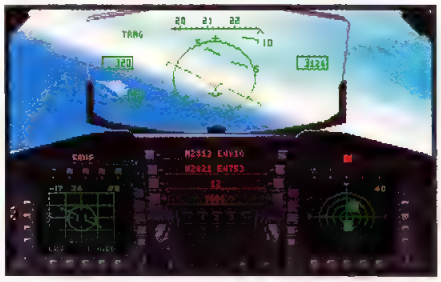
**Publisher:** MicroProse

**Developer:** MicroProse

**Rating:**

Generally speaking, flight-sim fans come in two varieties: the gamer who likes to get into the air quickly and shoot at stuff, and the air-combat junkie who likes absolute realism and perfect flight models that take weeks to master before *he* can get into the air and shoot at stuff. MicroProse's hugely popular *F-15 Strike Eagle II* catered mainly to the load-and-go crowd, but with *F-15 Strike Eagle III* MicroProse is trying to appeal to both camps. The results are at times mixed, but one thing is certain: whatever its flaws, *Strike Eagle III* is the only sim able to give the ultra-realistic *Falcon 3.0* a run for its money. In fact, *Strike Eagle III* even surpasses *Falcon* in several areas.

With the first two installments in the *Strike Eagle* series, MicroProse didn't strive to model every nuance and intricacy of actual jet flight and combat. Both were basically arcade games with an attitude, offering average consumers a plausible level of realism without forcing them to take on all the chores such authenticity normally entails. But spurred by the success of Spectrum HoloByte's *Falcon 3.0* — which at its most complex levels offers the most realistic flight models available aside from multimillion dollar military training devices — Microprose pushed the envelope in developing the latest installment of its most popular simulator. Realism became the new goal: they were going to do for the F-15 what *Falcon* did for the F-16. Since these two planes are radically different in design and purpose, the result would — at least in theory — complement *Falcon* rather than compete directly against it. But in the small world of jet-combat sims, comparisons are unavoidable.

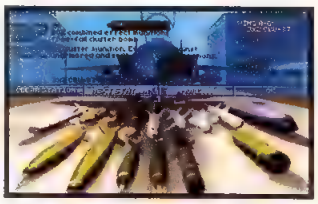


The actual F-15 has been through several design overhauls since its introduction in the early '70s. *Strike Eagle III* is modeled upon the F-15E, the most recent design and the one in which the proven air-to-air capabilities of previous versions were coupled with the enhanced ground-strike capabilities of a two-seater jet. Improved avionics and the addition of a Weapons Systems Officer ("Wizzo" for short) give the E model the ability to penetrate enemy territory at very low altitudes and neutralize targets quickly and efficiently. Unlike the nimble, single-engine F-16, which is primarily an air-superiority fighter, the F-15E (dubbed the "Mud Eagle" for its low-altitude role) is a double-engine beast with a lethal air-to-ground payload — and several tons more weight. Ergo, it's a bit less maneuverable in close-quarters combat.

That's why *Strike Eagle III* leans more on the strategy of air-to-ground missions than the flashy dogfighting of *Falcon*. The game starts with a gorgeous animation sequence (the graphics during game play never look as good as the intro, a somewhat annoying trait becoming increasingly commonplace among PC games). You're then dropped straight to the Hangar screen, from which you can control modem play, select missions, set flight models, head out immediately on a Quick Flight, and begin and continue careers. There's more than a hint of *Falcon* here, but the interface is easier to navigate, thanks to its clean, uncluttered design.

Realism can be set at one of four generic levels (from Easy to Extreme), but you can also choose Standard or Authentic settings for each of twelve options such as flight model, weapons effectiveness, displays, radar, etc. Some settings simplify the displays a bit or cause the enemy to react more slowly, but the game doesn't become an arcade-style shoot-'em-up when settings are on Standard: it just makes the Advanced mode more accurate and challenging.

Your start your career as a second lieutenant, flying missions in Korea, the Persian Gulf, or Panama. Each theater offers its own challenges: The hills of Korea and Panama help mask the plane from enemy radar but



make low-altitude flight a bit tricky, while the flat deserts of the Gulf mean that you don't have the option of evading a radar signal by dodging behind a mountain. After selecting a

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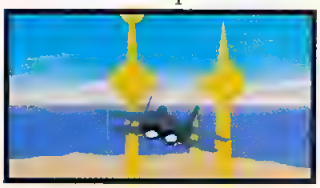
theater, you may tackle Single missions or enter the Campaign mode. While the missions are well-structured, interesting, and diverse, the Campaign mode is rather uninspired. More on this later.

Before each sortie you head to the Briefing Room to be assigned Primary and Secondary targets, receive intelligence on suspected threats and enemy preparedness, and view maps with fly-by pictures of the targets. From there it's off to Loadout, where you can accept the default weapons load or

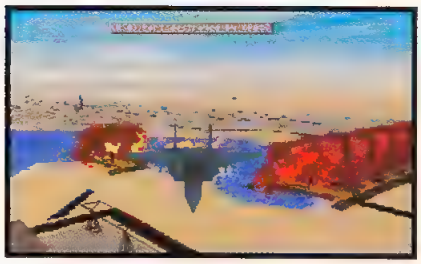


customize your arsenal. An attractive screen displays the plane with all the weapons laid out before it; just click on a type of ordnance to see its characteristics and weight. When you're happy with the payload, it's time for takeoff.

Once you're in the air, it's clear that *Strike Eagle III* is more attractive than *Falcon*. The shading and texturing of the polygons, the bitmapped explo-

sions, and the level of terrain and target detail are a far cry from *Falcon*'s flat polygons. At first it all looks a bit odd, somewhat messy and unattractive when compared to the "clean" polygons of other air-combat sims. The ground looks as though it's been sprinkled with green or beige confetti that's constantly shifting in a stiff breeze.

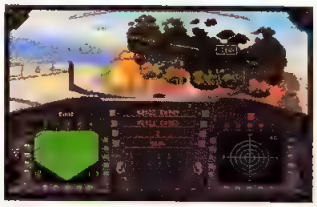
On slower computers (including my 386/40 with 8 megs of RAM) the frame rate is inadequate to properly process these graphics, and the result is a mixed bag. My initial impression, in fact, was that *Strike Eagle III* was just plain ugly. But it grows on you after a mission or two, and upon returning to the much cleaner but less detailed graphics in *Falcon*, there's no getting away from the simple fact that Microprose wins the visual contest hands down. The Eagle itself is beautifully rendered, and weapons delivery simply looks better and more realistic than Falcon. The same bitmapped explosion is used regardless of the target you've destroyed, but it's a fairly attractive one and better than what *Falcon* offers. After each flight, a "video" recap of the mission provides a slick replay of hits and misses.



But a really great flight sim is more than just good looks: it stands or falls on its flight model, and here *Strike Eagle III* is a vast improvement over *Strike Eagle II*. Handling is more unforgiving, and payload weight affects maneuverability more accurately. It still isn't what we've come to expect from the incredible realism of *Falcon*, but it's darn close — and in the long run makes for a more accessible sim-ulator, with a degree of challenge and accuracy exceeded only by *Falcon*. In Authentic mode, the electronic warfare systems and weapons delivery modes are tricky to master, but not so much so that they're intimidating to gamers who just want to jump in and get down to business. Finding the enemy, locking on the target, keeping your six clear, and dodging ground threats make *Strike Eagle III* more difficult than your average sim, yet it never becomes the slave to authenticity that *Falcon* is.

There are several important areas where *Strike Eagle III* is plainly outclassed by *Falcon*: training, documentation, mission depth, mission construction, and squadron control. The documentation is needlessly confusing, and the absence of a "Red Flag" training and mission construction mode — the feature that makes learning *Falcon* a snap — are sore points indeed, resulting in a learning curve that's steeper than it should be. Unlike *Falcon*, where you feel that the success or failure of each flight could affect the course of the war, the missions in *Strike Eagle III* almost seem to exist in a vacuum. You won't find wingmen or squadrons in *Strike Eagle III*, and the single-plane missions make it seem as though it's just you against all the enemy forces. The Campaign mode has the feel of single missions strung together, with a loosely defined goal that's either achieved or not. On the plus side, *Strike Eagle III* at least gives you the choice to fly single Career missions, unlike the forced campaigns of *Falcon*.

*F-15 Strike Eagle III* doesn't have all the bells and whistles of *Falcon*, but what it does have is impressive indeed, and while its failings may be vexing, its successes are noteworthy. Delivering a realistic-feeling com-



bat sim that's also fun and easy to use is no small feat, but Microprose has certainly pulled it off. *F-15 Strike Eagle III* is a terrific simulation, with features sure to appeal to PC pilots from novice to ace.

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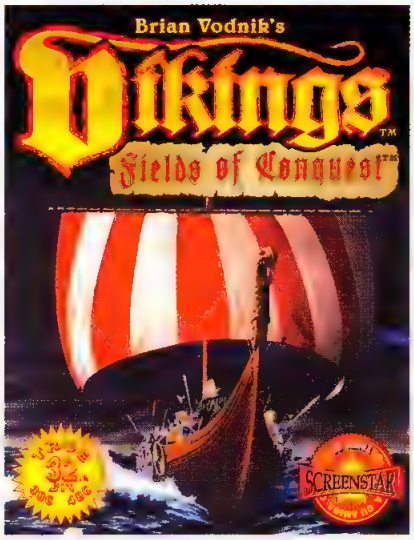


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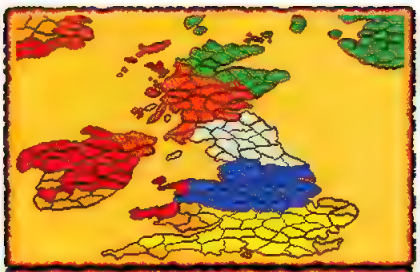

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# VEIL OF DARKNESS

**JEFF SEIKEN**

**Category:** Fantasy Role-Playing

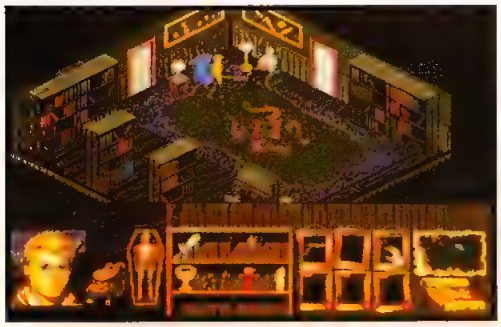
**Publisher:** SSI

**Developer:** Event Horizon

**Rating:**

It's a safe bet that there's a goodly number of veteran adventurers out there who have had their fill of orcs and ogres, wands and wizards, and all the other trappings of the FRP genre. And who can blame them? A steady diet of warmed-over Tolkien can grow boring, no matter how artfully it's packaged and prettied up.

In all likelihood, fantasy will remain a staple of the market for the foreseeable future. Still, gamers hungering for something different have reason for optimism. Slowly but surely, publishers are awakening to the possibilities in some of fantasy's sister genres, most noticeably in the field of horror. The last few years, in fact, have seen horror come into its own in the PC gaming world, with titles such as *Elvira I* and *II*, *Alone in the Dark*, *Dark Seed*, and *The 7th Guest* leading the way. To this growing list can now be added *Veil of Darkness*, developed by Event Horizon Software and published by SSI.



As might be expected, the move from fantasy to horror has not involved a radical rethinking of the form (although *The 7th Guest* might change all this). A game like *Elvira*, for instance, simply took the first-person perspective of the dungeon crawl and added some gory graphics and campy humor to create the right kind of spine-tingling ambiance. In *Veil of Darkness* (*VOD*), the format is even more derivative because the game was developed by Event Horizon, the team that produced *The Summoning* for SSI. Event Horizon tinkered a bit below the hood, but the engine driving *VOD* is almost identical to one found in *The Summoning*.

Like its predecessor, *VOD* is a one-character affair. The game casts you in the role of a cargo-plane pilot who crash-lands in a remote Transylvanian valley, circa 1930. And everyone knows that Transylvania is synonymous with that most feared of supernatural creatures, the vampire. Sure enough, this particular valley is under the thrall of a vicious vampire called Kairn, a 16th-century Rumanian nobleman who embraced the black arts out of hatred of his father and in doing so became one of the undead.

*VOD* includes all of the handy little features that made *The Summoning* such an ease to play. A perfect example of such a feature is the way the program maintains a text file of all NPC conversations, which can later be edited or printed out on paper. (you can also create hard copies of maps). But beyond simply reproducing *The Summoning*'s good points, *VOD* proceeds to improve on the design in a number of ways. The graphics are noticeably better, with the various scenes and locales drawn in much richer, more detailed fashion. Indeed, the artwork in *VOD* is more on a par with what you'd find in a graphic adventure than in your standard FRP romp.

The game also offers an elegant solution to the problem of perspective in indoor scenes. Programs like *The Summoning* and Origin's Ultima games basically provide you with an overhead view much like you'd get if someone ripped the roof off the building. *VOD*, in contrast, uses a much more aesthetically pleasing scheme. For interior shots, the walls closest to the viewer are simply eliminated altogether. The effect is akin to that of looking at a stage set from a balcony seat in the theater.

"User-friendly" is a term that reviewers tend to invoke a bit too frequently these days, but in *VOD*'s case the phrase fits — and not only for the excellent interface. While the typical adventure game can be as vindictive as a TV gangster — make a mistake and it's curtains — *VOD* takes a more benevolent approach. Failure to solve a puzzle or make the right connection might prevent you from progressing to the next part of the story, but there's none of the irksome "oops, I'm dead, time to restore," shtick that's endemic to the other games of this sort.

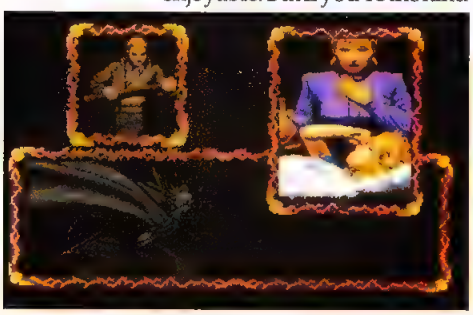
Combat is handled in a manner almost as benign as the rest of play. Combat occurs only in very selected locations, and if an encounter turns sour, you can literally walk away from your foes. What's more, if the prospects of even infrequent

clashes with the creatures of the night seem like too much of a nuisance, you can stack the odds in your favor by choosing to fight all battles at a lower difficulty level. In other words, problem-solving — not swordplay — reigns supreme here.

The object of *VOD* is, of course, to kill Kairn. But before you can confront him you'll need to perform well over a dozen intermediate tasks, all set forth in the "prophecy" that foretells of Kairn's eventual demise. Game play itself is tightly scripted. Although your quest will take you to numerous locations within the valley, you'll learn of them only gradually. Some will be revealed by NPCs when you perform certain deeds for them; others you'll pick up from the idle chatter of the regulars at the inn (who function as a sort of Greek chorus, commenting on recent developments and driving the plot forward).

*VOD*'s congenial nature extends to all aspects of the design save one: the puzzles, which are decidedly more fiendish than friendly. Some clues are rather obvious, but this makes the subtle ones all the harder to tease out. In general, as you explore the environs and encounter various NPCs, you need to keep a close watch for slightly unusual details, no matter how mundane they might seem. See someone smoking a pipe? Then it's probably a good idea to ask him about it, as your inquiry might net a meaningful response. In my opinion, some of the puzzles require intuitive leaps that stretch the bounds of fair play, but then again I was never very good at riddles.

As a computerized scavenger-hunt, *VOD* proves quite enjoyable. But if you're the kind



of person who likes a side order of story with your plateful of puzzles, you're likely to come away less than satisfied. The designers doggedly try to set the scene with a short story in the manual, but this material fails to connect with the situation in the game. The story describes in lengthy and rather histrionic terms how Kairn

came to assume his present form, followed by an epilogue explaining that Kairn has been luring brave men such as yourself into the valley for centuries, secretly hoping that one will be resourceful enough to overcome him and so end his tortured existence. I'm sorry, but the notion of a vampire with a death wish doesn't strike me as a very compelling premise.

If the game is short on plot, it's also weak on character and atmosphere. NPCs serve as mere talking heads, and what passes for conversation in *VOD* is loaded with an almost stupefying amount of banalities and trivia. Other elements of the game are simply silly, such as the peasant farmer you run across who sounds like one of the *Beverly Hillbillies*. It's obvious that the designers did not perform one shred of research for the game, or if they did, they managed to hide this fact pretty effectively. Perhaps these expectations are unrealistic, but historical detail can enrich and enliven a game, as a title like *Darklands* so vividly demonstrates. *VOD*'s milieu is so flimsily constructed that you can almost imagine the designers winking at you as the absurdities pile up.

Most troubling of all, the game shows little appreciation of how horror works as opposed to fantasy. In fantasy, the quest format has been (and still is) part and parcel of the whole genre from Tolkien onward. But in horror, a different dynamic is involved — the protagonist is not a hero on a hunt, but rather an unwitting accomplice, caught in a snare of fear and dread. What makes horror so compelling is that it presents a vision of the universe unexpectedly — and usually inexplicably — turned malignant. Unfortunately, *VOD* appears blind to all of this. There's no sense of menace or even mystery in the game. As for Kairn, he's nothing more than your standard computer game fall-guy, waiting for the hero to turn up at his lair and dispatch him. *VOD*'s designers can call their game horror if they like, but to my mind it's simply fantasy with different costumes and props.

In the final analysis, *Veil of Darkness* is so much candy for the brain: tasty candy, no doubt, but candy nevertheless. Yes, it's challenging, but in the same way a crossword puzzle can be challenging — purely as a mental exercise. It certainly leaves your emotions untouched, and emotion is arguably the single most important ingredient in creating a true sense of horror.

**GP**

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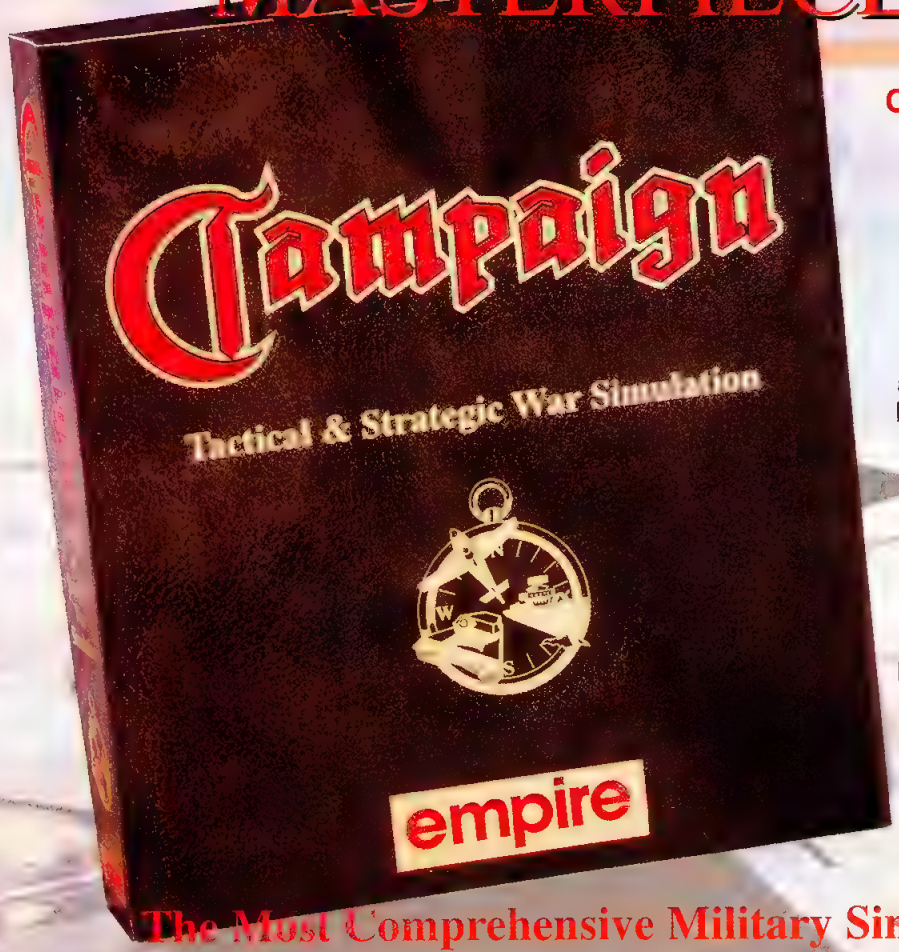


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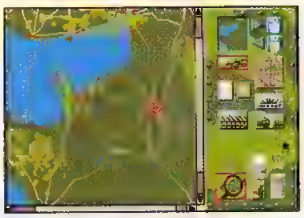

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Product Information Number 170

# STUNT ISLAND

**T. LIAM McDONALD**

**Category:** Flight Simulation

**Publisher:** Disney Software

**Developer:** The Assembly Line

**Rating:**

While it's true that the latest generation of flight simulations has reached new and incredible levels of realism, the idea itself is beginning to wear a bit thin. New and improved versions of old standbys, replications of different planes, new combat theaters and scenery modules; no matter how exciting to PC pilots, they're all variations on the same theme — get your helicopter/jet/prop plane/blimp into the air and steer around looking for people to shoot or installations to bomb — with judgment of each product based considerably more on execution rather than concept.

But Disney Software is out to shake up the PC-flight community with a product which, at first glance, seems a tad silly: *Stunt Island*, which lets you "shoot" and "edit" computerized "films" of stunt flights.

Of course, it turned out not be silly at all. In fact, it's one of the most innovative flight simulators ever produced.

Stunt Island is a small, apocryphal place off the coast of Southern California which, the story goes, was purchased by the major studios as a place to shoot high-risk stunts without messy things like administrative work or safety precautions. It's a hoot of a concept, especially the part about all the studios agreeing to purchase the place together, as though studios could agree on a shade of wallpaper, much less ownership of an island.

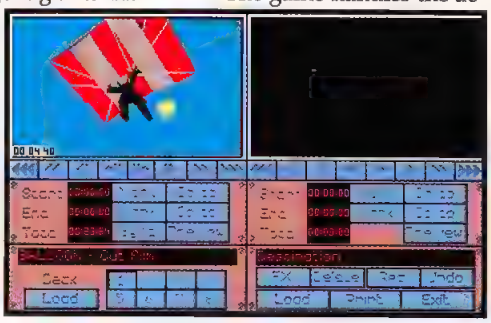
The island is shaped like a blown-out volcano, with sprawling hills, plains, and bays serving as the sites for several dozen sets. Stonehenge, Los Angeles, small towns, stadiums, tunnels, seaports, the UN, Hoover Dam, Alcatraz, the Golden Gate Bridge, a castle, and many other locales litter the countryside like crumbs left behind by negligent giants. At the center of it all is the Stunt Island port and administrative buildings. Upon entering the port, you're greeted with an interface consisting of jungle paths, complete with signposts directing you to post-production facilities, the landing strip, the production office, and so on.

So what can you do with *Stunt Island*? Plenty. You can fly any one of 45 aircraft, including jets, prop planes, hang gliders, a meteor, a duck, and other odd craft; try performing 32 specific stunts, either as part of a stunt competition or just for kicks; film these stunts from a wide assortment of camera angles; edit and replay these stunts with a sophisticated screening facility; and design your own stunts using a powerful set-design utility.

That's a lot for one game to offer. In fact, it may be a bit too much, as some parts of the program are certainly weakened by all this demand.

You can get up and flying quickly by selecting one of the stock missions in the Stunt

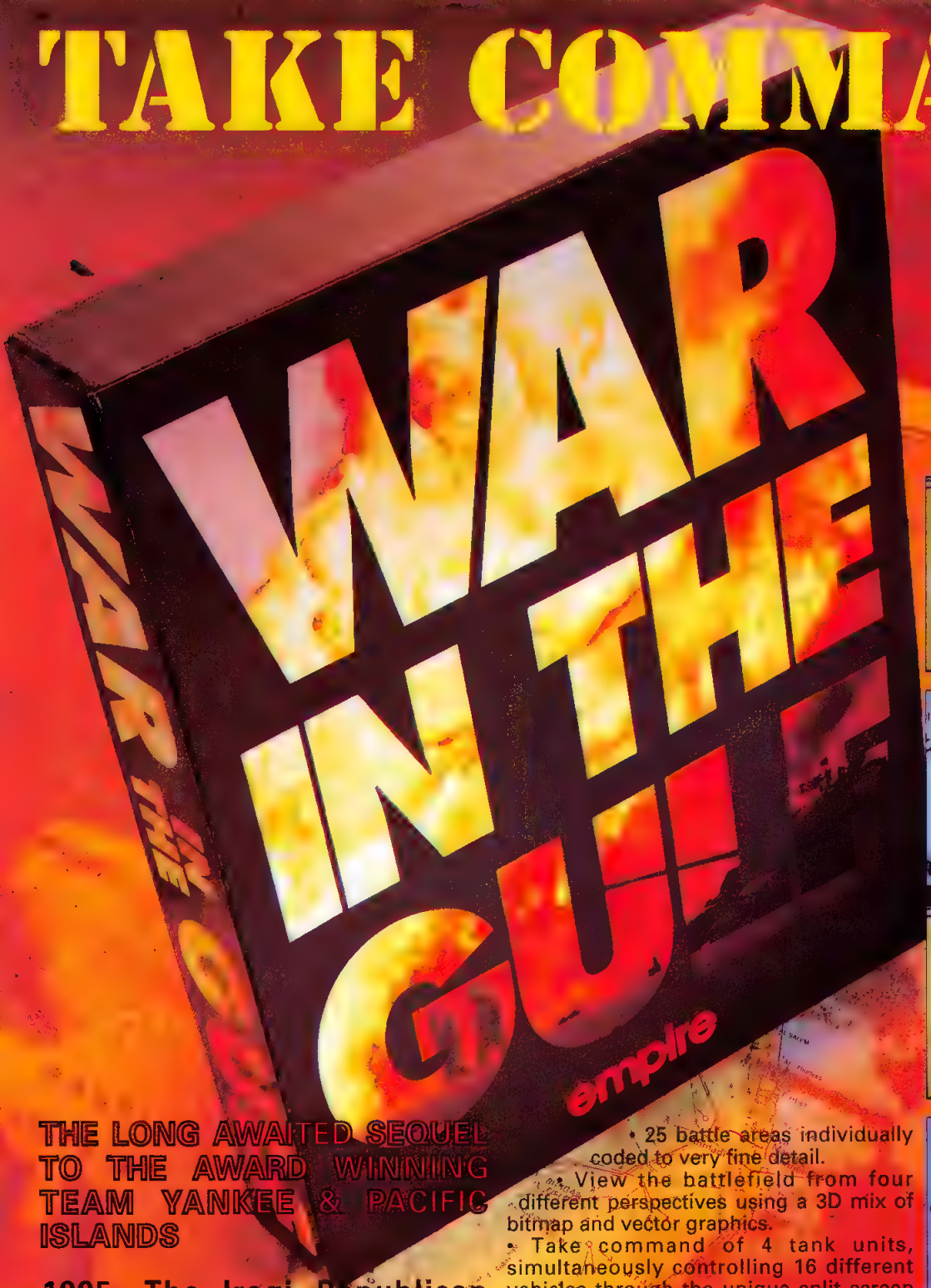
Coordinator's office. There's plenty of variety here — trick landings, barnstorming, combat, rescues, crashes, and other fun, elaborate stunts to fly and film. The trick is getting it right in the fewest takes, since each take costs money. Some stunts place strict demands on speed and altitude — on "hitting the mark," so to speak — and if these aren't met the stunt is considered a failure and must be performed again.



The game handles the actual flight sequences much as any other simulator. You steer with the joystick, raise the landing gear, fire weapons, control speed, etc. Whether it's a jet or a duck that's being flown, the controls are pretty much the same, and herein lies the problem at the core of this otherwise excellent game. Simply put, the flight model is terrible. All the aircraft handle with the grace and finesse of a mud pig, and the slightest pressure on the stick can result in bewilderingly sharp turns. Sim buffs accustomed to the accuracy of other programs will have to adjust to the way these craft handle (players new to computerized flight, of course, won't be faced with the problem of unlearning any flight dynamics).

The problems with the flight model are, of course, due

# TAKE COMMAND



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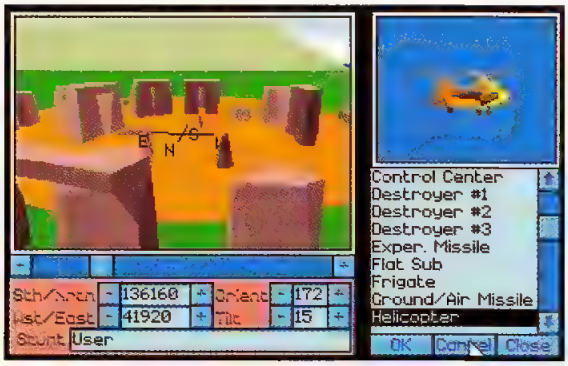
to the fact that there are 45 very different craft to choose from. Some do behave uniquely, but only subtly in terms of speed, effects of turning, and lift. It's not easy to create a program that handles an airliner and pterodactyl with the same mechanism, so the problem is understandable. Still, it keeps *Stunt Island* from being a superior simulator, and this is something of a shame.

Much of the real power of this program is concentrated in its editing and set-design utilities. When flying a stunt, eight cameras are rolling, and regardless of whether a flight is successful, you can save each take and then edit them together at the Editing Deck (there's also an option to let the computer edit the film for you). The Editing Deck can control all eight shots at once, allowing you to replay each, sort them, and then decide which angles are best and how they should be spliced together.




It's a crash course in *mise en scene*, and definitely not simple to master. Digital readouts time the shots and allow insertion of new cuts. The editing deck consists of playback and recording decks, sitting side by side onscreen. Use the playback deck to view the raw footage from however many cameras you chose to use for that stunt; the destination deck allows you to save an edited sequence before inserting sound effects and music. Fades, freeze frames, insertions of footage, title sequences, color control (you can make the film black and white if you like), and speed (for slomo or superfast images) can all be manipulated on the destination deck. There's a lot to do here, and while it's no breeze to use, the entire process is fairly user-friendly, thanks mainly to the excellent design of the control panels.

Even more powerful than the editing deck of *Stunt Island* is the Set Design department. This is where you pick a spot on the island to place up to 40 objects (from over 800!), creating sets for your own stunts or modifying existing ones. A large part of the Set Design screen is occupied by a map of the island that designates just where objects are being placed. A helpful foldout map is included with the game; use the coordinates on the map to quickly plop an object on the exact location where you want it. Sliders for tilt and orientation are used to control the facing and altitude of the viewing window, which can be zoomed up close and down to ground level.

Beneath a smaller screen to the right are 40 slots, each of which is used for selection of one of the many props, cameras, buildings, vehicles, people, or other objects. The first slot is always occupied by the aircraft being flown; all the rest are open for up to eight cameras or 39 items. Grouped into various categories, the items include everything from an A6E Intruder to your choice of a pink or brown pig. You can even select which way the pig (or the Intruder, for that matter) is facing, how high it is off the ground (flying pigs!), the speed at which it's traveling (that pig just broke the sound barrier!), attach a tracking camera to it (Hog-Cam!), or make it do several other things that no self-respecting pig should have to do.

There are dozens of programming variations available — you can make objects explode when they come within a certain proximity of other objects, make them follow cues, assign camera angles to them, and understand complex If/Then clauses to trigger events — this is *one* powerful construction set. I'm working on a scene in which my commando duck has to prevent a kamikaze cow from blowing up Stonehenge, while being harassed by a UFO and ground fire from Castro insurgents.

Though the planes are awkward to fly, you'll get accustomed to the controls over time, and there's just so much to delight in with *Stunt Island* that it's hard to gripe much about that drawback. Set aside a chunk of your hard drive for this one, because chances are you'll be coming back to it again and again.

GP

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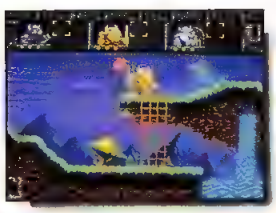

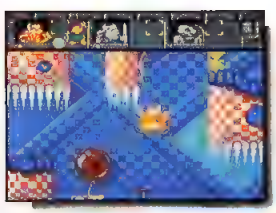

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**Product Information Number 182**

# POPULOUS II: TRIALS OF THE OLYMPIAN GODS

**GARY MEREDITH**

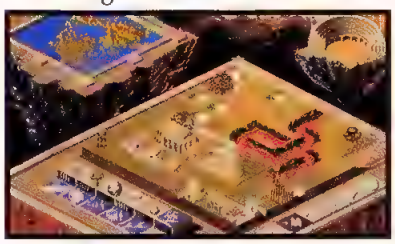
**Category:** Strategy

**Publisher:** Electronic Arts

**Developer:** Bullfrog Productions

**Rating:**

Ever find yourself longing for the good old days? I'm not talking about nickel Cokes, big bands, or the days of the iron horse. I mean the good *old* days, when mortals were at the whim of a bunch of gods who knew how to have a really good time. Ruination, famine, utter destruction — you name it, and there was a petulant super being with a corner on the market.



Now you can return to those glorious days in *Populous II: Trials of the Olympian Gods*.

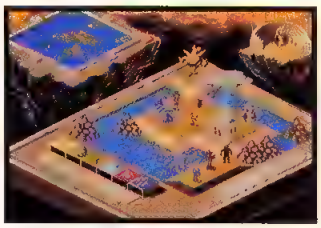
As with the original *Populous*, you try to gain control of a succession of worlds by being a little quicker, a little smarter, and sometimes a little more ruthless than your opponent. You must instruct your subjects, or walkers, to settle and populate each new world, preventing your counterpart's walkers from gaining a foothold. And again you have at your disposal powers only dreamed of by mortal man.

*Populous* pitted you as a generic "good" god against the "bad" god; in *Populous II* you battle it out against mythic Greek deities. If you're good enough, you'll eventually tangle with Zeus himself. And to successfully battle these fellows, you'll need to take strategic advantage of the new powers which gradually become available to you: lightning bolts, tornadoes, plagues, blights, fire storms, and more have been added to the volcanoes, swamps, floods, and earthquakes you could control in *Populous*. Your actions aren't all destructive; you can do things like plant flowers and trees to increase your followers' prosperity and happiness.

But despite the lofty Olympian setting, *Populous II* is a much more personal game than its precursor. Take, for instance, your choice of a face. When creating your deity, you "build" his countenance (there doesn't seem to be any option to create a goddess) with a mixture of "good," "bad," and "neutral" features. What's more, the face you construct determines how opponents will react to you. Though you'd probably like to think of yourself as completely good, there are advantages to being at least *partially* bad. A ruthless nature definitely comes in handy when you need to pillage and destroy quickly.

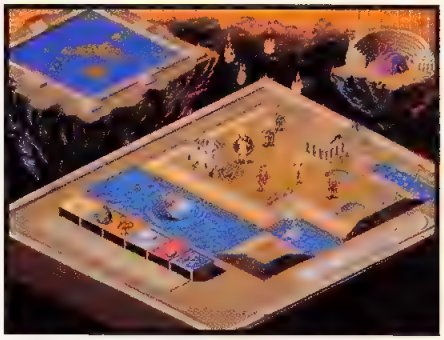
Many of the basic precepts of *Populous* are intact in the sequel, such as manipulating your papal magnet to best advantage or knowing what commands (gather and settle, attack and settle, go to magnate, go to leader, etc.) to issue. Preparing land for settlement, by raising or lowering it, is also an integral part of your strategy. (You can do this manually, or let the computer handle it.) The actions you're able to perform are still dictated by your level of manna, or power; early in a game just leveling land requires a substantial amount of the stuff.

Besides the new powers, one of the most entertaining enhancements is the ability to convert your people's leader into one of the heroes of Greek mythology. All your faves are here: Odysseus, Perseus, Heracles, and even Helen of Troy, who uses her beauty to lure opposing walkers to a watery death.



The mouse-driven interface is almost identical to the first game, but graphic options now let you choose between a very handsome high-res 16-color display and a standard 256-color display. There's also an option to remove the graphic shell for a much larger view of the action. The walkers in *Populous* were fairly generic; now you can make out women, old men, brave warriors, and so forth.

The sound effects are great, if you have one of the supported sound boards. (A word of advice — to hear some of the really low frequencies on the soundtrack, use some good headphones, or run the output into a sound system with some fairly large speakers.) The game requires expanded memory, and to avoid choppy animation you'll need a *very* fast 286 or better.



Like its predecessor, *Populous II: Trials of the Olympian Gods* is a deep and entertaining game, with enough variety to keep you striving for a place in the pantheon of Mount Olympus for eons to come.

GP

# CAESAR

**T. LIAM McDONALD**

**Category:** Strategy/Simulation

**Publisher:** Impressions

**Developer:** Golden Sector

**Rating:** GP

My first reaction after loading *Caesar* could be summed up in two words: *Sim Rome*. That's understandable, since *Caesar* is essentially a game in which you build cities from the ground up to win the favor of Rome, and eventually the title of Caesar. There's also a dash of *Civilization* in the stew — empire-building is the key to winning — but this is a city-building game all the way.

*Caesar* brings the entire city/world-building subgenre back to its real-life roots: ancient Rome. The Roman cities — artfully designed around forums, plazas, baths, workshops, and with their intricate road networks, sewage, aqueducts, and elaborate entertainments — provided the model for many that followed. Industry, fortification, education, and even amusement were crucial elements in the growth of civilization, and *Caesar* captures this mixture quite nicely by putting the player in the combined position of governor, general, economist, and urban planner.

There aren't a lot of factors affecting the difficulty level in *Caesar* — it's basically a question of how much money you're allotted to begin construction of your city. In the easy game, it's 8000 *denarii*; at the most difficult level you're given about enough to buy a pig and build a hut. A sprawling map of the empire greets you as the provincial scrubland is randomly generated. Though the graphics aren't drop-dead gorgeous, they're perfectly acceptable and serve the game quite well.

You rule on two levels: the province and the city level. The larger province level depicts the total boundaries of your governorship. A centralized city with a single cohort (army) is the nexus point for four smaller hamlets and a crossroads connecting your province to the rest of the empire. On this level, highways, great walls, forts, and other massive projects are undertaken.

Connecting the hamlets and the crossroads to the major city increases trade and prosperity, but also tends to bring barbarians to the gates. During battle, you can command your army to assume one of four formations or a full retreat. (*Caesar* will be linked with Impressions' upcoming *Cohorts 2*, so that these confrontations can be fought in more detail.) While it seems needlessly difficult to raise a decent sized army, few other complaints can be made about the game's rudimentary but effective combat elements. If the cohort fails in battle, ranks are broken, troops are demoralized, and the barbarians overrun the city, where they can be stopped by local forces or city walls.

The occasional conflict not withstanding, *Caesar* is first and foremost a game of city-building. Beginning with a forum — the focal point of each city — and expanding to include roads, water distribution, houses, bath houses and myriad larger structures (temples, coliseums, heavy industry, various workshops, marketplaces, etc.) the ever-growing city fluidly takes shape under the guidance of your mouse. To help manage your city's growth, you can turn to a group of advisors, as well as a series of graphic displays, to stay informed on nearly every aspect of your city's health, from defense and water distribution to social unrest.

Becoming accustomed to the causal relationships in *Caesar* takes practice, as it initially seems that logical decisions yield illogical penalties. With barbarians at the gates, would the citizenry *really* rebel over a slightly higher conscription rate? And would a one percent increase in taxes really cause unemployment to skyrocket? But this doesn't mean the game is flawed; the only legitimate gripe you can level against *Caesar*'s designers is that you don't agree with the socioeconomic paradigm they've chosen.

Though it lacks the wide variety of structures of *Sim City*, *Caesar* has more depth of play than *Sim City*. And though *Caesar* doesn't have the scope of *Civilization*, that's not really a shortcoming. This isn't a game of far-flung conquest; the appeal of *Caesar* lies in finding the perfect balance in order to prosper and move on to a higher position. *No* decision is isolated from another, and *Caesar*'s near-perfect mix of strategy and resource-management makes for an entertaining, challenging, and maybe even (gasp!) educational package. This one is highly recommended.

# DISCOVERY: IN THE STEPS OF COLUMBUS

**JEFF SEIKEN**

**Category:** Historical Simulation

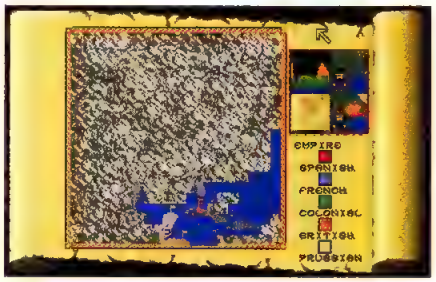
**Publisher:** Impressions

**Developer:** Impressions

**Rating:**

Poor Columbus. The much-ballyhooed quincentennial of his westward voyage met with as many protests as it did cheers, two big-budget movies celebrating his life and exploits bombed at the box office, and now comes *Discovery — In the Steps of Columbus* from **Impressions**.

Perhaps it's a tad unfair to lump *Discovery* in with those other disappointments. The game is by no means a dud, nor does it do any particular disservice to Columbus' memory.




But too much about the design seems half-hearted and even a little half-baked. Although it deals with one of the most exciting eras in modern history — the Age of Exploration, when a handful of intrepid men opened up a whole new world to Europeans — the game appears indifferent to the dramatic potential of its subject. And the goofy graphics don't help matters either.

In *Discovery*, you represent a European power engaged in a five-way struggle for colonial domination. At the start of the game, the land across the Atlantic remains unexplored and shrouded in mystery. Although your exact goal varies with the scenario, your basic objective is to establish settlements on the continent and nurture them to prosperity. Economic success tends to be self-reinforcing, since profits are used to fund new expeditions, leading to additional colonies and further revenues.

Game play occurs in real-time, with many activities automated in a style similar to *Populous*. When a ship makes a landfall, for instance, colonists immediately disembark and set to work clearing trees and planting crops. Your role is primarily one of resource allocation, deciding which sort of buildings to construct with the settlement's precious supplies of timber. Forts, warehouses, factories, farms, and churches all play a necessary part in a colony's survival and growth. As goods start to accumulate, however, you also need to focus your attention on finding an overseas market for your colonial output in order to keep gold flowing back into your coffers. In the end, whichever country establishes the most favorable balance of trade will usually come out on top.

Graphics have never been Impressions' strong suit, and *Discovery* won't change anyone's mind on this score. You play from a standard overhead view of the landscape, but in brazen defiance of the rules of perspective, the top quarter of the screen depicts nothing but cloud-flecked sky. As a result, figures moving north drop out of sight below the horizon as if they had fallen off the edge of the world. Weirder yet, when you scroll the map quickly northward, the terrain will flow down across your screen from the horizon like water cascading down a waterfall.

Impressions' products have never rated highly as simulations either, but that's simply a reflection of the company's priorities, which place clean and challenging play above realism or accuracy. Nonetheless, *Discovery* sometimes betrays a basic command of history that would make even a college freshman blush with shame. For instance, the program includes Prussia in the lineup of European countries questing after territories in America, although Prussia didn't even exist as an independent state until 200 years later. Then there's the game map: It encompasses all of North America but leaves out South America and a good part of Central America, despite the fact that most of the early efforts at exploration and colonization focused precisely on these two regions.

There's no hard-and-fast rule which says a computer game must serve double duty as a classroom primer. Nonetheless, it's hard to excuse such lapses, particularly in light of the fact that the manual includes a quite thoughtful and intelligent 47-page historical essay on the subject. If nothing else, the article proves that someone at Impressions knows better.

Whatever their faults, Columbus and the explorers who followed in his wake were men of great imagination, daring, and vision — three qualities which *Discovery — In the Steps of Columbus* sorely lacks.

**GP**

# WILSON PRO STAFF GOLF

**STEPHEN POOLE**

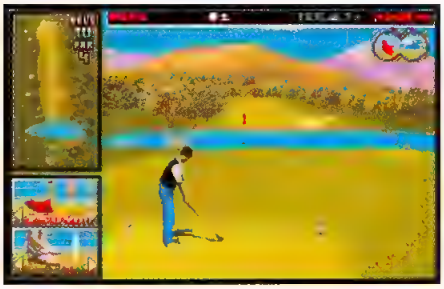
**Category:** Golf Simulation

**Publisher:** Konami

**Developer:** Novotrade International

**Rating:**

To create a commercially successful golf simulation, you have to offer something that other programs don't have. Look at how the four big titles in the golf-sim category have



carved out their own niches: *Links 386 Pro* has incredible photorealism; *Jack Nicklaus Signature Edition* boasts an excellent course-design utility; Electronic Arts' *PGA Tour Golf for Windows* lets you compete against dozens of tour pros; and Microprose's *David Leadbetter's Greens* has a multitude of 3-D viewing angles for each of the game's six courses.

It's tough to beat any of these guys on their own turf, and with *Wilson Pro Staff Golf*, Konami doesn't even try. Instead, *Pro Staff Golf* is aimed at PC golfers whose systems aren't powerful enough to accommodate those other simulations. If you're tired of waiting 20 seconds between shots as your, say, 386/SX laboriously redraws the screen, you're in for a whole new experience with *Pro Staff Golf*.

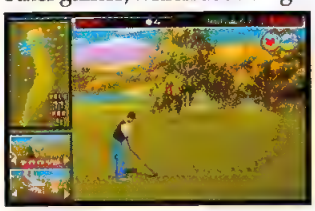
I tried the game on a 286/12 with 640K of RAM, the minimum hardware requirements for the game. Though I waited roughly 10 to 12 seconds between shots, I used that time to ponder the fact that nearly every other golf simulation currently available wouldn't run *at all* on such a system. I then loaded it on a 486/33 with 8 megs of RAM and compared *Pro Staff Golf*'s redraw time to *386 Pro*: *386 Pro* averaged around 12 seconds between shots, while it took *Pro Staff Golf* about a second.

*Pro Staff Golf* is as forgiving on your pocketbook as it is on your system. With a suggested retail price of $39.95, chances are you'll be able to pick it up for as low as $29.95. But the old adage "You get what you pay for" is very much true in the case of *Pro Staff Golf*.

The game comes with only one course, and a fictional one at that. (*386 Pro* also comes with one course, but the program was designed to accommodate the numerous course disks for the original *Links*, and Access already has two new course disks designed specially for *386 Pro*.) To Novotrade's credit, it's a very challenging course with a good deal of replayability — the slopes on the greens of the back nine are the steepest I've ever seen in a golf game — but PC golfers who want to play a real-life course will be disappointed.

You can customize your golfer's appearance (you pick the gender, as well as color of clothes, hair, and skin), but you *can't* select which clubs you'll carry onto the course. It's not a huge shortcoming, but I personally prefer realism over political correctness.

The interface is unique among PC golf games. Unlike other games, which use a single



meter to set shot strength, slices, and hooks, *Pro Staff Golf* has separate displays for power and accuracy. A circular gauge determines power (though a right mouse-click will restart the meter if you aren't satisfied with shot strength). After you've set the power, a golf-ball graphic appears with a superimposed red dot moving over it in a figure-eight pattern; where the dot is when you click determines the shot height and accuracy.

The graphics, though not jaw-dropping, are arguably as good as in any golf sim except *386 Pro*. Sound effects are limited to a swing-noise, and the rather unrealistic thump of the ball hitting the fairway or green hundreds of feet away.

The only real defect in game play comes on the green. On putt attempts over 60 feet, the power gauge is supposed to switch from 60 to 99 feet, but on at least a half-dozen putts of 55 feet or less the gauge changed without warning to the maximum range.

There are no computer opponents in *Pro Staff Golf*. There are, however, a very healthy number of side games which can accommodate up to ten human players, from drop out scramble to bingo-bango-bongo.

In short, *Pro Staff Golf* delivers what it promises: a fast-paced game of golf with plenty of variations to make things interesting. If nothing else, the amenable price tag and its ability to run on a 286 are enough to warrant a hearty thumbs-up.

GP

# BEAT THE HOUSE

**RANDY PALMER**

**Category:** Casino Simulation

**Publisher:** Spirit of Discovery

**Developer:** Spirit of Discovery

**Rating:**

One thing about gambling — it's not how you play the game that matters, it's whether you win or lose! With this credo in mind, Spirit of Discovery offers *Beat the House*, a simulation that gives you a chance to learn, at your own pace, how *not* to lose your shirt. It's a great way to sharpen your skills if

you're planning a trip to Atlantic City or Las Vegas, or just to get a fix of casino action.

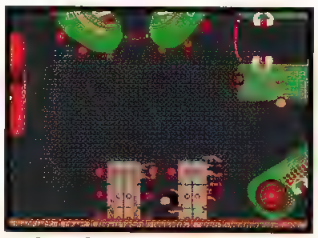
To this end, *Beat the House* is designed with beginners as well as seasoned players in mind. If you know how to play a game, you can jump right in. If you need assistance or practice, the documentation thoroughly covers general casino rules and provides strategic advice, gambling hints, and odds charts. The *Beat the House* Companion, by renowned gambling expert Avery Cordoza, helps elucidate the more complicated methods of risking your money (the betting layout at the Craps table can be daunting to a neophyte bettor), and even includes info on casino etiquette and details of gaming history. For players itching to get started, there's a concise, informative on-board Help system for easy access to gaming rules and strategic tips.

After registering your name in the Hotel Directory (basically the save-game function), a single keystroke or mouse click will take you to any of the gaming tables: Blackjack, Video Poker, Craps, Roulette, or Slots.

Even a greenhorn can start playing Slots safely; just insert the coin(s), pull the handle, and wait for the reels to stop spinning. There are 3- and 4-reel machines with different payouts — if you're extremely lucky you might win the million-dollar jackpot but you're more likely to hear the tinkle of a mere handful of coins as they tumble into the payout tray.

Video Poker machines are really second cousins to the slots, with payout (but not payout *odds*) determined by the number of coins you play. I would have preferred straight poker, because without betting rounds there's little strategy left to poker — the game is reduced to simply knowing which cards to hold, something beginners can learn pretty easily using the Tutor's advice.

The Roulette layout doesn't offer as much flash as slots of video poker, but still there's something alluring about a game where a tiny steel ball careening around the inside of a numbered wheel



makes players yell, scream, and maybe even have a nervous breakdown. Roulette is famous for offering odds that seriously favor the house, but at least the adrenaline flows steadily here.

And if that's not enough, Craps can actually induce gambling fever. Listening to those bones click together prior to the come-out roll, you can almost smell the big bucks. (Too bad they usually stay put in the house bank.) The game employs a pretty neat graphic of tumbling dice for you to shake your fist at when you fail to make your point. Craps is one of the most daunting of casino games, but Spirit of Discovery's on-line will bring you up to speed as well as any craps instructional manual.

The Blackjack tables will probably get the busiest workout in *Beat the House*. All the blackjack options are here, including splitting, double-downs, and insurance (a true sucker bet, according to the game manual). Players can choose to play with 1, 2, 4 or 6 decks; the more decks used, the more difficult it becomes to count cards, a strategic technique employed by seasoned players to enhance their chances of winning (explained thoroughly in the manual).

The graphics are clean and crisp, the interface is designed so intuitively that you don't necessarily have to read the manual, and game play is, for the most part, pleasingly realistic. You do need a relatively powerful machine (a 386/25 works nicely) to avoid irritating delays. Except for the dubious decision to include Video Poker at the expense of the standard version, *Beat the House* offers nearly everything gamblers from amateur to professional could want in a game.

**GP**

# MAGIC CANDLE III

**WILLIAM R. TROTTER**

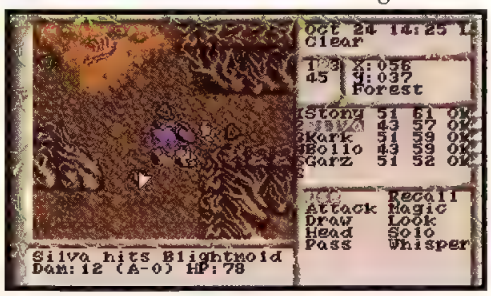
**Category:** Fantasy Role-Playing

**Publisher:** Mindcraft

**Developer:** Mindcraft

**Rating:** GP

This game's appearance was a surprise — the ink was barely dry on the reviews of *Magic Candle II* when the third episode hit the stores. The plot gimmick in this installment centers




on a deadly blight that is eating away at the Solian Lands far to the south of King Rebnard's domain. Your quest, once you have assembled a party (or transferred characters from your *Magic Candle II* game), is to scour the southern lands and find the source of this plague, then locate a cure. You'll need to bring along more food than usual, because nothing grows

in the infested areas — nothing you'd care to *eat*, that is.

The game begins inside a desolate forest near Castle Oschcrun. The first character to join your party (just in time to keep it from being wiped out) is Prince Garzbondgur of the orcs. He's a reasonably loyal fellow, for an orc, and his presence will greatly facilitate interactions with that odd race. He has a lot of money on him, too; he won't pool his funds with you, but you can usually get him to pay for accommodations in an inn.

There are several new features in *Magic Candle III*. The mouse interface is much improved and very intuitive. You no longer need to use the Formation command to thread your party through a narrow opening — just click with the directional arrow and the party members do a sort of "Chinese Fire Drill" until they pass through, after which they realign themselves in the original formation. The automatic notepad function has been revamped and is more valuable than ever. And the effects of both illness and poison are deadlier in this game than in the first two installments, so be sure to take extra amounts of Loka and Medicin herbs.

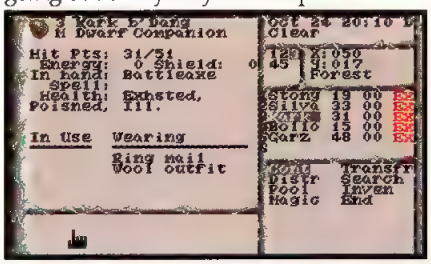
Some detailed changes seem intended to make the game more convenient. You no longer have to assign someone to do research in a library; just enter the building and you'll have instant access to whatever lore or wisdom resides there. And you can send assigned characters across the countryside without fear of their being captured.

Combat is handled in the same way as *Magic Candle II*, but some of the skirmishes have a weird look to them. Blight spores are often encountered, and their manner of graphic representation sometimes makes them hard to distinguish from the vegetation. (And how much damage *does* an arrow do to a large amoeba?)

Despite the incremental

improvements mentioned above, there's something a little flat about this game. I was a big fan of the first two *Magic Candles*, with their leisurely pace and marvelously textured worlds. There are no major flaws in this edition, but for some reason it seems to take an unconscionable amount of time to get cracking.

One of the things I most loathe in an FRP is gratuitous, mindless, every-third-turn combat; but I found myself longing for some in this one, going out of my way to stir up




trouble to relieve the tedium. And just as soon as you get a well-trained, decently equipped party together, somebody *always* gets tired or hungry. During the first five hours of game play, I spent as much time feeding and resting weaker party members as I did making significant progress in the plot (or at least it seemed that way).

Once again, there doesn't seem to be anything glaringly *wrong* in *Magic Candle III*; it just seems curiously lacking in vitality compared to the earlier two games. Such a judgment is, of course, utterly subjective, and other fans of the series may like it just fine. All I can say is that I began to weary of it after seven or eight hours of play, something that never happened as I explored the worlds of the first two games.

# SHADOWLANDS

**NEIL RANDALL**

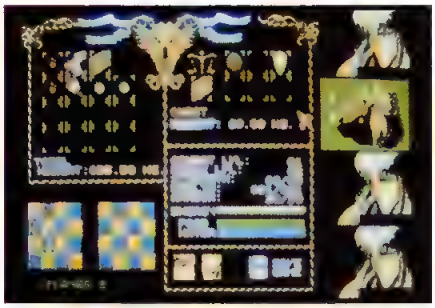
**Category:** Fantasy Role-Playing

**Publisher:** Domark

**Developer:** Teque

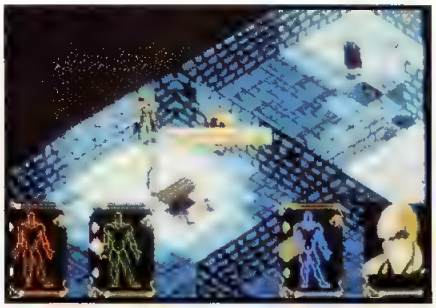
**Rating:**

As far as plot and concept are concerned, *Shadowlands* is a fairly ordinary fantasy role-playing game. There's a dark overlord, and a party of four characters trying to work their way through a series of increasingly dangerous levels trying to defeat him. Weapons must



be found, spells must be cast, secret keys and passageways must be discovered. Predictable and comforting, but not much more.

What distinguishes *Shadowlands* from other FRPs are its interface and, in part, its display. The display is a three-quarter overhead view of the party and the surrounding terrain, similar to the view found in a number of other FRPs. The difference is that the designers have labored mightily to create what they call the "Photoscape" lighting system, whereby light and shadow are rendered much more realistically than in many games. Light a torch in a dungeon, for instance, and you see a carefully patterned circle of illumination, bright at the center and dimmer at the edges. Walk around with the torch, and the areas of light and shadow change accordingly.



Unfortunately, the undeniable advantages of this system are offset by the simple fact that the game's graphics aren't much to write home about. From the title screen through the character creation screens and into the dungeon scenes themselves, the graphic images are okay, but that's about it. As a result, the game doesn't draw you in on first glance, as many recent FRPs do. If there's a *Shadow-lands II* in the works, the designers should give graphics enhancements top priority. They just don't captivate.

Because it plays differently than most FRPs, it's essential that you read the game's well-written manual. Unfortunately, the interest piqued during your reading isn't sustained during actual game play. The reason? All the things that sound so excellent and exciting in the manual are difficult to perform in practice.

In *Shadowlands*, your party of adventurers isn't just a multi-person conglomerate. Each adventurer in can go his or her own way, performing separate actions even on separate levels of the dungeons. In fact, splitting up the party is necessary at several points in the game because one adventurer will have to trigger something while another waits to act immediately on the consequences.

The screen shows the main adventuring area, as well as insets for each of the four members of the party. To make an adventurer do something, you must click within that character's inset. Moreover, you must click on a specific part of that character's body outline. To get a character to read something, click on the head and then on the item to be read. To have the character pick up an item, click on the left arm and then on the item (all items that can be acted on will flash). To fight, click on the right arm, as long as the arm isn't carrying a torch or other object that can't be used as a weapon.

There are two other parts of the body outline which you can click upon. Click on the left leg to move a character while the rest of the party remains where they are (that's how you split them up). Clicking on the right leg means that the character is the leader of the party, and all adventurers within sight of him will immediately move to join and follow him. If they're not in sight, the inset changes, and until you move them back each other's view they can't rejoin.

All of this is extremely interesting — precisely the kind of realism FRPs desperately need. But the frequent clicking on the body outlines quickly becomes both tedious and annoying, and the whole system has to be rethought with a heavy emphasis on playability. Add to this the fact that torches and food seem to last a very short time (meaning you must constantly forage for them), and you have a game that is, overall, unexpectedly frustrating. There are some great ideas here, but only FRP fans in search of novelty will find the experience truly enjoyable.

GP

# TEGEL'S MERCENARIES

**T. LIAM McDONALD**

**Category:** Tactical Combat

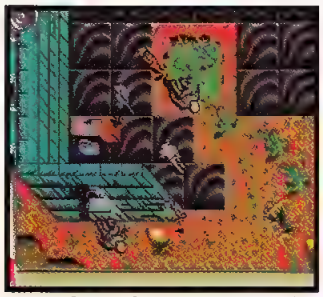
**Publisher:** Electronic Arts

**Developer:** Mindcraft

**Rating:**

Here's the perfect example of a promising concept and design being undermined by sloppy programming. One session with this glitchy, twitchy game and you'll either be itching to throw your mouse out the window, or praying for one heckuva patch disk.

*Tegel's Mercenaries* places you in charge of a group of six commandos with various specialties and skills. Under the supervision of the glaring General Tegel, you act as B.O.S.S. (Base Operations Squad Sergeant), directing the squad — from the safety of the drop shuttle — on a series of interplanetary missions. The challenge is to pick the right people for each mission, and give them elaborate series of commands

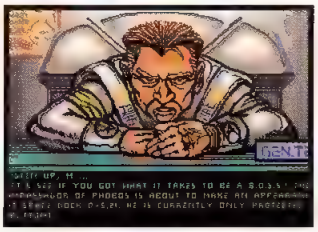


to perform the necessary mission, with all action taking place in real time.

At first glance it looks good, with a simple but colorful pseudo-Japanamation look and a fair variety of landscapes and enemies. Unfortunately, getting those little guys to do what they're supposed to, and do it properly, is a major challenge. In fact, it's more challenging than any other part of the game...

The premise is standard sci-fi boilerplate. When the first contact with an alien life form — the chlorophants — is made in the solar year 2104, Mars and the moons of Earth, Saturn, Jupiter, and Uranus have been colonized, and each has its own government. An organization called The Consortium has been established in order to coordinate a unified effort against the perceived menace, but it's soon discovered that the chlorophants *aren't* a threat. The chlorophants were allowed to settle on the colonies, causing such an increase in the population that the existing police forces were unable to ensure order.

To address this crisis, a special Act allowing authorized



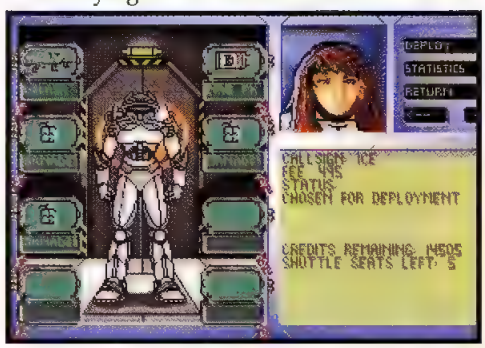
people or groups to maintain private armies was passed. Soon, megacorporations were using mercenaries to wage war on the competition. Now, a new race — the K'Kistiks — has been discovered, and they appear to be *very* hostile. Toss in a few rebel chlorophants, and you have a messy galaxy with lots of mercenaries running around.

There's a good variety of missions, and each one serves to further the plot. Spaceports, spaceships, and the Ice, Plant, Bug, and Terran Worlds are the six locales for all operations, with a nice assortment of critters — the various Chlorophants, Robots, K'Kistiks, and Predators — on hand to keep things from being too easy. There aren't a *lot* of variables, but everything is mixed up enough to keep the game from becoming repetitive.

The backbone of this game is your private army, which will carry out — or more likely *not* carry out — your orders. Each is rated in categories such as strength, loyalty, intelligence, and health, and each is skilled in areas such as weapons, medical, computer, explosives, defensive, etc. They can also improve in certain areas as they gain experience.

The view from the drop shuttle gives you a godlike perspective of the entire area of operations. A point-and-click interface is used to control each mercenary; you can tell a mercenary where to move, who to attack, what to search, which equipment to use, etc. They can travel in a group or individually with a sequence of commands. Each merc has varying degrees of autonomy, from by-the-book rule-followers to renegades who may ignore B.O.S.S. commands and do things their own way.

Utilizing static images, text boxes, and minimal sound, *Tegel's Mercenaries* is no-frills gaming. There's nothing wrong with that, but all too often the mercs simply won't do what you tell them: They walk in circles for no reason, ignore commands, back into walls, twitch, fail to fire even when ordered to do so, and generally act annoying. The interface is




unresponsive and clunky: in a word, awful. That's too bad, because this could have been a fun little game: not groundbreaking, but entertaining nonetheless. As it stands, though, *Tegel's Mercenaries* is an exercise in frustration and an object lesson in bad programming.

**GP**

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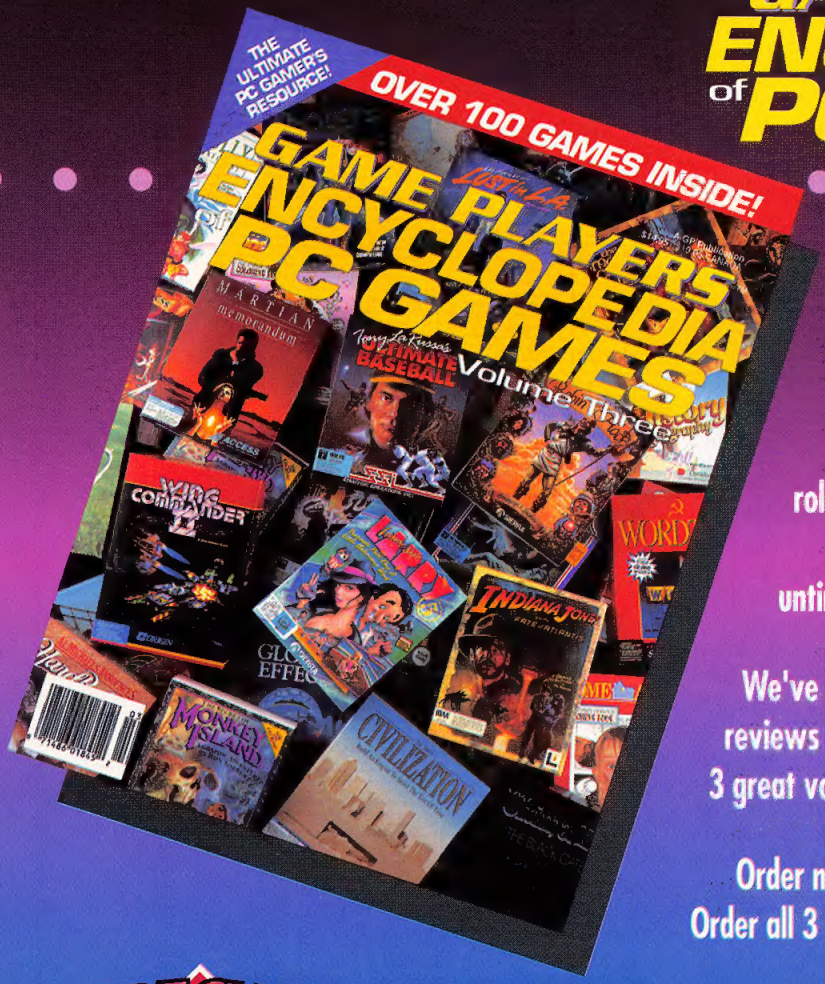


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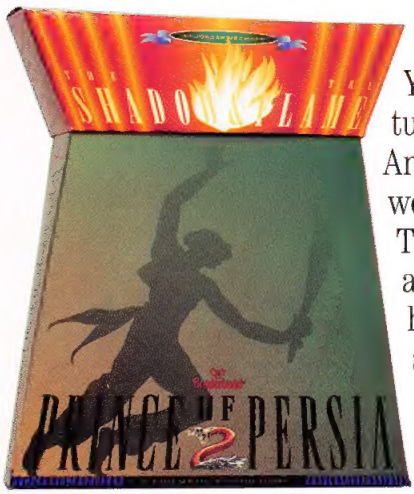


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